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Sex, Desire, and Grace in Walker Percy and Frederick Buechner.

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Sex, Desire, and Grace in Walker Percy and Frederick Buechner

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by

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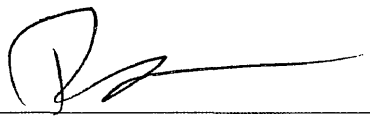

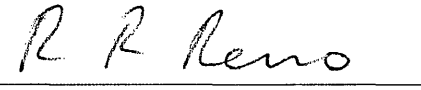

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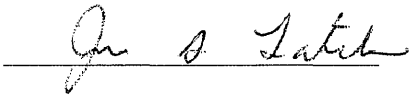
Chairperson 

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MF

SEX, DESIRE, AND GRACE IN WALKER PERCY AND FREDERICK BUECHNER

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In this thesis, I argue that Frederick Buechner and Walker Percy use fiction to expand and elucidate on the Christian existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel. More specifically, I argue that sex tends to function in their novels as an avenue of grace, which ends or at least soothes the existential alienation and despair that is the hallmark of the human condition. Buechner's treatment of this theme in his novel Lion Country is less sophisticated than Percy's, seen in The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming; sex is wholly positive for Buechner's characters, while for Percy, sex can be either negative or positive, and while the novelists' heroes come to similar conclusions, Percy's Will Barrett takes a much longer time getting there.

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Introduction: Christian Existentialist Philosophy

"The hearts too hard for breaking,
We hobble down to Your undertow."
- Terry Scott Taylor, "Grace is the Smell of Rain"

"If grace is to be found anywhere, it must come from beyond the world of things and the society of human beings, though it may indeed come through these. We are directed toward a transcendent source of grace. This is neither a senseless nor a speculative idea, but rather a question of life and death that arises directly out of the structure of our own existence."
- John MacQuarrie, "How Is Theology Possible?"

Søren Kierkegaard's influence on Walker Percy is strong enough and well-documented enough that it became almost a joke to him as his career progressed. In a satirical article for Esquire in 1977—composed entirely, it seems, of questions he was tired of being asked—Percy denied any feelings for dead authors, adding, "Please don't ask me about Dostoevski and Kierkegaard" (Questions 159). Despite his getting tired of talking about it, it would be difficult to overstate the impact Kierkegaard had on Percy; it appears that to some extent the Danish philosopher drew him out of the secular humanism that had characterized his life as a doctor and opened up the supernatural world to him:

> He was a man who was trying to open up a whole new area of knowledge to me in the most serious way, the most precise way—and quite as serious as any science, or more serious. And, of course, it is religious too . . . I saw for the first time through Kierkegaard how to take the alternative system seriously, how to treat it as a religion or emotion. I hadn't seen any way to think about it. Kierkegaard gave me a way to think about it. (Dewey 282)

Kierkegaard made Christianity a viable alternative to atheism for Percy, and thus it is not surprising that Percy's early novels in particular are fashioned as object lessons from Kierkegaard's texts. The epigram to his first novel, 1961's The Moviegoer, for example, comes from Sickness Unto Death, and the epigram for his second, 1966's The Last Gentleman, comes from Either/Or.

Given Kierkegaard's obvious influence on Percy, it is somewhat baffling that Kierkegaard's spheres of existence do not seem to be a popular framework for reading Percy's two novels with Will Barrett as protagonist, The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming. Such a reading is offered by Percy himself, most notably in an interview with John C. Carr in which he identifies Will Barrett with the religious sphere and one with Bradley R. Dewey in which he talks about the broader influence of Kierkegaard upon his novels, but no critics seem to focus on it. Martin Luschei, in the first full-length study of Percy's work, The Sovereign Wayfarer, deals a bit with the spheres of existence, although he focuses far more on the Kierkegaardian term *repetition.* Percy's biographer Jay Tolson applies a discussion of the Kierkegaardian spheres to The Moviegoer but drops the thread when talking about later novels. In his seminal Walker Percy: An American Search, Robert Coles goes to great lengths to connect Kierkegaard and Percy but does not connect Barrett's life with the spheres of existence. Other Percy scholarship travels these same roads, usually bringing up Kierkegaard and sometimes even Stages on Life's Way but never reading The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming through the spheres of existence.

In this thesis, I intend to fill that hole. I will be reading The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming through a Kierkegaardian/Marcelian/Heideggerian lens.

Specifically, I will examine the way sex functions in these two novels as a method to create and to relieve Heideggerian stasis and to move Will Barrett in and out of the three spheres of existence. Barrett spends the vast majority of his life floating aimlessly amongst the three spheres of existence, showing symptoms and signs of all three of them. Such a lifestyle of Heideggerian "curiosity" locks him into a pattern of stasis, and in The Last Gentleman, he tries desperately to attach himself to a fixed object (to enter the Kierkegaardian ethical sphere)—in this case, Kitty Vaught. Sex is in The Last Gentleman a fruitless pursuit because it is symptomatic of an attempt to enter into the ethical sphere via a person who is not in it herself. Simultaneously, he is pulled away from sex and from the ethical sphere by his dabblings into religion, although this, too, proves ultimately ineffective. In The Second Coming, Will appears to be stabilized and firmly in the ethical sphere by way of his material and cultural success, but in reality he is still simultaneously drifting and static. In the second novel, however, sex functions as a viable option in the form of Kitty's daughter, Allison Huger. Will's relationship with Allison grounds him and allows both of them to move into the ethical and then into the religious spheres. Sex becomes salvation, or at least an avenue for it.

I will be filtering my discussion of Percy through Frederick Buechner's novel Lion Country, which deals with the same issues in a simplified way. Buechner's philosophy is simplified—perhaps because he is not the philosophical novelist that Percy is and perhaps because he tells the story of Antonio's conversion in only one novel instead of the two Percy takes to relate the similar story of Will Barrett—in that sex is not problematic for him. Whereas Will is pulled both toward God and away from God by sex (albeit with two different women), the sexual experience of the novel's hero, Antonio

Parr, are painted solely in a positive light. Buechner's depiction of curiosity, stasis, and the spheres of existence thus serve as an introduction to Percy's more nuanced readings.

Antonio is a would-be believer who does not even seem to be aware that he is a would-be believer. He does not chase the invisible world, but neither does he live a life of blind hedonism. Instead, he is a secular celibate—emblematic of his alienation—who travels to Florida to expose a crooked minister named Leo Bebb. Bebb ultimately converts him, however, and this is initially accomplished when Parr sleeps with his daughter Sharon, an event explicitly compared to Christ's harrowing of hell. Parr's breaking of his celibacy is thus tied to his conversion to Christianity and both are viewed as a solution to his Heideggerian stasis. He is brought by sex simultaneously into the ethical and religious spheres.

It is appropriate to interpret Percy's novels through a Kierkegaardian lens, but this may not be exactly fair. In his biography Pilgrim in the Ruins, Jay Tolson notes that these strict Kierkegaardian readings miss "the breadth of his philosophical borrowings . . . Kierkegaard was only one figure at one pole of Percy's philosophical investigations" (238). The novelist was bedridden with tuberculosis in a sanatorium in 1942, and he spent a great deal of this period reading straight philosophy, as well as philosophical novels like Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground. Percy, of course, was particularly interested in existentialism, but not just in Kierkegaard; he read and digested atheist existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and Edmund Husserl. These atheist philosophers, of course, were staunchly opposed to the Christianity to which Kierkegaard had led Percy, but this

was not a problem; instead, he "found the difference a tonic and a challenge" (238). He read the great Christian existentialists, too, such as Karl Jaspers, but Tolson says that "Percy's closest *semblable* among the French existentialists was the Catholic Gabriel Marcel" (238). Marcel and Kierkegaard together seem to have given Percy the answers to the questions and dark scenarios he found in Sartre and Camus—simply put, they gave him a way out of the stasis put forth by the secular philosophers.

The vision of Christian existentialism presented in Percy's novels is thus a melding of various philosophers and novelists, more or less joined together into a cohesive whole. From Dostoevsky, for example, he gets the concept of man's ultimate freedom, his ability to go against reason and the ultimate superiority of his will. The narrator of Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground (echoed in nearly every work of existentialist fiction) argues against the popular 19th-century notion that man inherently does what is in his best interest. The Underground Man destroys his life without a concrete reason for doing so—out of "spite," he says. He spends his life suffering for the sake of suffering and uses his miserable existence as an object lesson against reason and society:

> Where did all the sages get the idea that a man's desires must be normal and virtuous? Why did they imagine that he must inevitably will what is reasonable and profitable? What a man needs is simply and solely independent volition, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead. (34)

Freedom, however, is for Dostoevsky and later for Percy, essential but not enough—the Underground Man's independent volition leads him not to any sort of salvation, religious

or otherwise, but instead to bitterness, meaninglessness, and self-destruction. Atheistic existentialism seems to find its limits within Notes from Underground. The world of Sartre, for example, is a world of man's absolute freedom, where he is "condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (41). Man is thus bound by two states, constantly in tension: that of freedom, the ability to do whatsoever one wants; and that of responsibility, having to answer for whatever one does. Sartre says that the main tenet of existentialist philosophy is that "existence precedes essence" and that man is "a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept" (35); therefore, "Man is nothing else but what he makes himself" (36). In doing so, however, people also make an image of what everyone should be—we all, according to Sartre, live our lives in the way we would have everyone live their lives. We are therefore responsible not only to ourselves for our decisions, but also to the entire world. This responsibility creates immense problems because of man's inherent subjectivity and limited epistemology:

> If I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from the subconscious, or a pathological condition? What proves that they are addressed to me? What proof is there that I have been appointed to impose my choice and my conception of man on humanity? I'll never find any proof or sign to convince me of that. If a voice addresses me, it is always for me to decide that this is the angel's voice; if I consider that such an act is a good one, it is I who will choose to say that it is good rather than bad. (39)

And so, with every action people take, they make a statement about actions that everyone else in the world should take, but at the same time, he is unable really to know if their conception of and prescription for humanity is the correct one. This tension, ever-present, puts the human subject in a constant state of "anguish" (Kierkegaard uses the word "anxiety," and Heidegger uses the word "angst," but these three words all refer to the same condition). Anxiety is the universal condition of the modern subject, and it is essentially the collision between absolute freedom and absolute responsibility.

Anxiety therefore isolates the self; subjectivity leaves it up to the individual to determine truth and to act accordingly, and no one is able to make a decision like this for anyone else. The entire world—including the voice of God, since the individual must ultimately decide where that voice originates—ends up squarely inside the existentialist's head, which is free to decide what is true and what is false, what to and what to leave undone. But this radical subjectivity, especially when combined with the anxiety of freedom/responsibility, alienates the modern self. People are thus removed from the world around them, and no connection is possible, as far as Sartre is concerned.

Martin Heidegger is not much more optimistic. He speaks of angst near the end of the first book of his monumental Being and Time as a sort of self-estrangement: "The absorption of Da-sein in the they and in the 'world' taken care of reveals something like a *flight* of Da-sein from itself as an authentic potentiality for being itself" (172).[1] In other words, when the human self is thrust into the world—as every human self intrinsically is—it necessarily loses track of its own identity, alienating people not only from the

[1] Da-sein is a fundamental concept for Heidegger; literally translated as *being there*, it refers to the self as it relates to the world, thus making it similar to Sartre's *pour soi*.

world around them and from other people, but from themselves. This manifests itself in, among other things, curiosity:

> When curiosity has become free, it takes care to see not in order to understand what it sees, that is, to come to a being toward it, but *only* in order to see. It seeks novelty only to leap from it again to another novelty . . . Thus curiosity is characterized by a specific *not-staying* with what is nearest. Consequently, it also does not seek the leisure of reflective staying, but rather restlessness and excitement from continuing novelty and changing encounters. (161)

Alienation, then, leads to existential stasis, which manifests itself not only in a failure to move but also in a sort of constant movement without direction, similar in this respect to the souls in Dante's Inferno: "So I beheld, and lo! an ensign borne / Whirling, that span and ran, as in disdain / Of any rest; and there the folk forlorn / Rushed after it, in such an endless train" (3.52-55). This sort of stasis-through-directionless-movement manifests itself in Modernist literature—heavily influenced by existentialism—as an Eliotian "living death": "A crowd flowed over London bridge, so many / I had not realized death had undone so many" (Eliot 1.62-63).[2] Most of the world, therefore, is trapped in existential stasis, as is evidenced by their boredom and their directionless flitting from interest to interest.

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[2] Concern with existentialist thought would become even more prevalent—perhaps even dominant—in the mid-20th-century milieu in which Percy wrote. Many of Percy's contemporaries—Ralph Ellison, John Updike, and Kurt Vonnegut, just to name a few—deal heavily with themes like alienation and absurdity.

Stasis, unsurprisingly, leads back to dread, or angst, or anxiety, which is described by Heidegger as a general sense of fear, rather than a fear of some external object in particular:

> Nothing of that which is at hand and objectively present in the world, functions as what *Angst* is anxious about. The totality of relevance within the world at hand and objectively present is completely without importance. It collapses. The world has the character of complete insignificance . . . Thus neither does *Angst* "see" a definite "there" or "over here" from which what is threatening approaches. The fact that what is threatening is *nowhere* characterizes what *Angst* is all about. (174)

That *angst* is located *nowhere* (because it is everywhere, because it applies to the whole of existence itself) in effect isolates Da-sein in a type of nowhere as well; it is left drifting aimlessly, perhaps unable to move, perhaps flitting from one failed interest to another. The self is unable to commit, unable to make connection, forever left adrift in anxiety and alienation.

This stasis manifests itself in interpersonal relationships, as well. Heidegger says that it

> dominates being-with-one-another as much. The other is initially 'there' in terms of what they have heard about him, what they say and know about him . . . Being-with-one-another in the they is not at all a self-contained, indifferent side-by-sideness, but a tense, ambiguous keeping track of each other, a secretive, reciprocal listening-in. Under the mask of the for-one-another, the against-one-another is at play. (163)

The self-alienation of existential stasis leads to a social alienation, too: Authentic relationships, authentic communion and community are not possible in this state. Consequently, people are thrown even deeper into self-alienation, which Heidegger calls "falling prey" to the world: "Falling pretty to the 'world' means being absorbed in being-with-one-another as it is guided by idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity. What we called the inauthenticity of Da-sein may now be defined more precisely through the interpretation of falling prey" (164). The self is lost in a maze of unconnected pseudo-relationships and small talk, and alienation only deepens.

We see a concern about alienation in most of Percy's texts but particularly in his essay "The Man on the Train," published six years before The Moviegoer. Percy finds it rough going in the novel to define anxiety but instead suggests a definition through the extended anecdote of a man taking the commuter train to work:

> Whereas one commuter may sit on the train and feel himself quite at home, seeing the passing scene and a series of meaningful projects full of signs which he reads without difficulty, another commuter, although he has no empirical reason for being so, although he has sated the same empirical needs as commuter A, is alienated. To say the least, he is bored; to say the most, he is in pure anxiety; he is horrified at his surroundings. (84)[3]

[3] However, Percy, following Sartre, notes that commuter A is just as deep in anxiety as commuter B. Sartre says that "there are many people who are not anxious; but we claim that they are hiding their anxiety, that they are fleeing from it" (38), and Percy agrees: "commuter A's tranquility is no guarantee against alienation, that in fact he may be more desperately lost to himself than B in the sense of being anonymous, the "one" of "one says" (84).

Percy explicitly connects boredom to anxiety, which immediately suggests Heidegger's notion of "curiosity," and indeed Percy sees man every bit as lost and alone as do Heidegger and Sartre. But the story does not end there for Percy or for Marcel and Kierkegaard, his Christian existentialist role models. Marcel's "Testimony and Existentialism" is a direct response to Sartre's "The Humanism of Existentialism," which he views as overly pessimistic, a fantastic diagnosis without a cure. Like Sartre, Marcel stresses a sort of isolation through freedom and responsibility. His metaphor is of the observer as set apart from the witness. The observer loses a certain measure of his self-identity in observation: "I am alone with the phenomenon I observe, alone in a specific sense because I am without my identity: I am only a recording instrument, a recorder among many thousands" (93). This roughly corresponds to the Sartrean/Heideggerian notion of alienation, of man locked into his own brain and cut off completely from the world around him and from himself. But Marcel also posits the idea of the witness, whose responsibility connects him with other human beings and gives release to his alienation: "the witness always conceives of himself as standing in the presence of someone; I would say that he is essentially a-monadic. There can be no testimony on the plane of the monad; though there can be observation on this plane, even from the most subjective standpoint" (93-94). More importantly, testimony is a connection to something outside the individual and a means of self assertion; "it commits my entire being as a person who is answerable for my assertions and for myself" (95).

More important than his belief in the transcendence of the ego, however, is Marcel's notion that true human connection is not just possible but necessary. Sartre claims that "The frenzy of giving which comes over certain people at certain times is,

above all, a frenzy of destruction; but this frenzy of destruction, which assumes the guise of generosity is, in reality, nothing other than a frenzy of possession." In other words, any attempt at genuine human connection is a form of control. For Marcel, however, giving bestows meaning upon objects the way that testimony bestows meaning upon people:

> If my intention becomes personal and finds a means of revealing itself in the object I purchase, then it becomes possible to speak of a transmutation. By virtue of my giving it, the object, which had been until then merely a neutral thing, costing so much at this or that shop, acquires a new quality, a being-for-another, not for everybody in general but for this particular person . . . The gift, for the one who receives it, if it is really a gift, is not just one more thing added to his possessions; it exists in another dimension, which is that of testimony, since it is a gage of friendship or of love. (101)

By connecting the gift with the testimony, Marcel implies that giving, that the act of love itself, is a connection to objective reality, or, more accurately, an intersubjectivity, an actual connection between two human beings and perhaps an end, however temporary, to alienation. The gift and the testimony, therefore, are the keys to the "philosophy of life" which Marcel posits against Sartre's and Heidegger's "doctrine of death" (103)—a temporary end to alienation is possible through the gift. We will see this late in Percy's The Second Coming, as Will Barrett's alienation ends through his connection—sexual and otherwise—with Allison Huger, and in Lion Country through Antonio Parr's similar experience with Sharon Bebb.

In Christian existentialist terms, the ultimate end to alienation comes through grace, which is the ideal of the gift. Indeed, the existentialist theologian John MacQuarrie says that the only possible solution to the modern predicament of alienation and anxiety

> is the possibility of *grace*—a power from beyond man which can heal his estrangement and enable him to live as the being which he is, the being in whom are conjoined the polarities of finitude and responsibility. This possibility of grace seems to be the only alternative to despair if we take as honest a view of the human condition as Sartre does. (8)

Grace, then, in Christian existentialist terms, is a gift that comes from outside humanity—in other words, from God—and heals the alienation that is an integral element to living in the modern world. MacQuarrie says that this grace can come only from God; the world of nonsentient nature and other human beings are incapable of granting it, although he insists that "it may indeed come through these" (9). Marcel's examples of human-to-human gifts are models of grace, but its pure form is found only in a deity-to-man connection.

A similar schema is put forth in Kierkegaard's Either/Or, a book that asserts itself as a collection of related manuscripts written by at least three different authors and joined together by a fourth imaginary person, an editor. The first half of the book is a collection of addresses and essays by one "A," whose life represents of what Kierkegaard would eventually call the "aesthetic sphere" of existence; he feels himself caught in existential stasis ("I feel as a chessman must when the opponent says of it: that piece cannot be moved" [44]) brought about by his absolute freedom in the world ("What am I good for? For nothing or everything" [47]) and by his sense of responsibility for that freedom ("Our

age is thus melancholy enough to realize there is something called responsibility and that it has some significance" [141]). He is alienated from his society, which he sees as "paltry . . . without passion" (48), but he does not have a viable solution to this problem, either for others or for himself. He wishes he could find a refuge in religion but is unable to do so: "Yes, if I caught sight of a fidelity that stood every trial, an enthusiasm that sustained everything, a faith that moved mountains; if I came by a thought that bound together the finite and the infinite. But my soul's poisonous doubt is all-consuming" (53). Instead, all he can do is occupy his time, divert himself from the stasis that characterizes his life. Boredom is the aesthete's greatest enemy:

> This principle possesses to the highest degree that power of repulsion one always requires of any negative that genuinely provides the principle of motion. Not merely is it repellent, it is infinitely forbidding; and the person with this principle behind him must necessarily have an infinite momentum to make discoveries with. (227)

Kierkegaard's notion of boredom corresponds with Heidegger's "curiosity," then. The aesthete constantly staves off boredom with pleasure, flitting from interest to interest yet settling finally on none. "A's" aesthetic interests include essays on art, literature, and music, notably a section called "The Immediate Erotic Stages of the Musical Erotic," in which he examines Don Giovanni. According to "A," Don Giovanni is a masterpiece because it conveys the world's most abstract idea—"the spirit of sensuality" (69)—in art's most abstract form, music.

It becomes clear that, for the aesthete, music is itself a form of sensuality and that sensuality is bound completely to personal pleasure. Sensuality—desire and sex—

becomes the end goal of the aesthetic sphere—one lives in the moment, one feels, and one staves off boredom and stasis by those feelings. As Heidegger notes, however, this constant staving off of stasis is itself a form of stasis, and the aesthete is in reality deep in anxiety and despair. Like Heidegger, Kierkegaard stresses that for the aesthete, sensuality is divorced from connection and intimacy, and the aesthete does not make real connections with anyone. Physical love is a source of pleasure rather than communion, and the being-for-one-another becomes the being-against-one-another. Percy will demonstrate this through Will's relationship with Kitty Vaught/Huger, a relationship based primarily on sex that involves no element of genuine connection whatsoever. Similarly, in Buechner's Lion Country, Antonio's relationship with Ellie has only the appearance of connection, where in actuality it represents the being-against-one-another and deepens his stasis. Kierkesgaard portrays a similar situation in the famous "Diary of a Seducer" section of Either/Or, A young aesthete named Johannes, driven by boredom, coldly convinces a young woman to marry him and then leaves her out of that same boredom. He aims only for engagement, never for marriage, because real commitment would take the place of pleasure-seeking:

> The damnable thing with an engagement is always the ethical side. The ethical is just as boring in life as it is in learning. What a difference! Beneath the sky of the aesthetic everything is light, pleasant and fleeting; when ethics come along everything becomes hard, angular, an unending ennui. (305)

The aesthete, then, resists the ethical sphere out of fear of boredom, of stasis. Boredom and curiosity are themselves stasis, however, and, no matter how much the aesthete tries

to distract himself from his condition, the fact of the matter is that he is deep in despair, or angst, or anxiety. Kierkegaard, like Sartre, sees despair as a universal condition, but he cautions against seeing it as a wholly negative condition: "on the contrary, it is uplifting, since it views every man in the aspect of the highest demand made upon him, that he be spirit" (Sickness 33). The despair inherent in the aesthetic sphere becomes a sort of grace in that it coerces people to move into the ethical sphere, into commitment. Percy and Buechner both seem to see despair in a similar manner—it forces their characters into action and eventually leads them to salvation.

Kierkegaard represents the ethical sphere through the character of Judge Vilhelm, whose correspondence with "A" makes up the second half of Either/Or. Explaining the ethical only in its relation to the aesthetic makes the former somewhat difficult to define—add to this Vilhelm's relative dryness, and it becomes clear that the aesthetic is a more "interesting" sphere than the ethical. At any rate, Vilhelm cares for "A" but sees his behavior as essentially self-destructive. "Your activity," he tells him, "is designed to keep yourself hidden, and in that you succeed, your own mask is the most enigmatic of all; for you are nothing and exist merely in relation to others, and you are what you are in this relation" (479). In other words, while the aesthetic sphere seems to offer a sort of noble subjectivity, what it actually offers is a worldview that fails to create a cohesive self. Meanwhile, those who live in the ethical sphere have made an absolute choice—they become capable of giving testimony, in Marcel's terminology—and have thereby paradoxically defined themselves in relation to themselves. Judge Vilhelm explains: "In the ethical the personality is centered in itself; the aesthetic is thus excluded absolutely, or it is excluded in the absolute, but relatively it always stays behind" (491). The problem

with aesthetes (with the curious), according to Vilhelm, is that in their endless pleasure-seeking they make no real choices whatsoever; they have no commitments and therefore no connections. The irony is that by making no commitments, they define themselves entirely by their relation to the world around them; with no set identity, they become alienated from themselves, and despair sets in. The ethical sphere offers a chance for commitment to an external absolute, and paradoxically, through this commitment, the condition for the enjoyment and living of life becomes placed inside the individual, albeit by way of that external universal. The ethical, in reality, contains the freedom from boredom and the self-identity that the aesthete fears losing if he enters into it, and in fact it is only by entering into the ethical that the aesthete is able to gain these things. Antonio Parr, for example, finds himself much happier and excited once he commits to Sharon. The issue is more complicated for Percy; the ethical is never enough for Will Barrett, and he does not truly find freedom until he enters the religious sphere at the end of The Second Coming.

The ethical could take any number of firms. An ethicist could be committed to a political idea, to a religion, or to a system of belief. Vilhelm's example is marriage. In a letter to the judge that has not been reproduced, "A" has apparently disparaged marriage, which he imagines must grow unbelievably boring. In contrast to the aesthete's empty sensuality, Vilhelm defends marriage by describing true human intimacy:

> the secrecy system [that is, being-against-one-another] is by no means conducive to a happy, and thus neither to an aesthetically beautiful marriage. No, my friend; honesty, openheartedness, revelation, understanding, that is the life-principle in marriage; without it marriage is

> unattractive and indeed unethical, for then it separates what love joins, the sensual and the spiritual. (448)

Commitments such as marriage can therefore heal despair in a certain way; they can rejoin the self and the other, whose dissolution causes despair. We see this at the end of both Lion Country and The Second Coming, where the despair of the protagonists has been resolved by commitments to the women in their lives. The difference, though is that Will and Antonio, in addition to remaining in or entering into the ethical sphere, have also entered a third and ultimately superior sphere, "religious sphere."

Entering the religious sphere involves what Kierkegaard calls a "teleological suspension of the ethical," a move away from the external absolutes on which the ethical is built. Accepting that man's situation is a mixture between ultimate freedom and ultimate responsibility, Kierkegaard says that responsibility comes in two forms: responsibility to society (attained in the ethical sphere) and responsibility to God (attained in the religious sphere). The problem with these dual responsibilities is that the latter requires a temporary negation of the former: in order even to believe in God, one must turn aside from reason, the law of modern society. As Sartre points out, if we hear a voice that we presume is from God, we must consider the possibility that we are insane—the natural conclusion of rationalistic modern society—or that the voice is really the devil. Kierkegaard says that to believe in God, one must take the famous qualitative leap, a move away from both reason—which, as Dostoevsky has shown, we are not bound to, and which, as Sartre has shown, is limited in its ability to discover ontology—and society, at least temporarily. Faith, the qualitative leap, is thus set off against reason; one must (temporarily) let go of the latter in order to embrace the former. And because of

this, Kierkegaard says that society can never understand religious imperatives, which exist wholly subjectively. We see this in The Second Coming when Will Barrett is institutionalized for his faith in Allison Huger and in God; in Lion Country, meanwhile, Antonio must reject his reason and the laws of modern society and accept Bebb as a prophet once he learns of his indecent exposure.

Kierkegaard deals with the religious sphere mainly in two works. Fear and Trembling deals with Genesis 22:

> Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham . . . He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (Genesis 22:1-3, NAS)

This action, according to Kierkegaard, is what makes Abraham a great man, one of the model individuals of faith described in Hebrew 11. Being willing to sacrifice Isaac meant leaving behind everything that made any sort of logical sense—even God's promise to "make [him] a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). "He left behind his worldly understanding," says Kierkegaard, "and took with him his faith. Otherwise he would surely not have gone; certainly it would have been senseless to do so" (Fear and Trembling 50-51). Even more importantly, Abraham did so without any question of whether he should or not—"It is human to complain, human to weep with one who weeps, but it is greater to have faith and more blessed to behold the believer" (51). Abraham, entering the religious sphere,

not only leaves behind the laws and dictums of society but also something fundamentally human. This is Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical; or, as it is commonly called, the "blind leap of faith" (even though Kierkegaard never uses that term). "He believed the ridiculous" (54), says Kierkegaard, and that is a necessary condition for leaving the ethical sphere in favor of the religious. More importantly, in order to make that leap, one must do what is required without resignation.

What is important about Abraham is that he trusts God enough that "he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded" (65). This distinction is why the leap of faith is called the "teleological suspension of ethical" as opposed to the "teleological rejection of the ethical"—the leaper does not turn his back completely on the ethical. He is allowed to hold on to his wife, or his religion, or his political beliefs. But he must be willing to give them up if that is what is asked of him. The teleological suspension of the ethical is thus only temporary—Will, for example, manages to have both Allison and God, and Antonio's conversion actually takes place at the same time that he commits to Sharon.

In Stages on Life's Way, Kierkegaard shifts the focus to a current-day example of the religious sphere. His discussion of religion is composed chiefly of another diary, likely meant to echo the "Diary of a Seducer" from Either/Or. This diary, too, deals with male/female relationships and a broken engagement, but its author is not the cynical rake that the Seducer is. Echoing Judge Vilhelm, he would like nothing more than the marry his beloved:

> I believed that I would be released, that I would be changed, that I would have seen myself in love and by looking in love at her I would see myself

> saved—then I would have become like her, a bird on a branch, a song of joy in youth. I believed that we would have grown up together, that our life would be happy for us in our union and in its happiness understandable to others, like a happy person's greeting as he hurries by and throws us a kiss. (215)

If he were able to exist permanently in the ethical sphere, as Judge Vilhelm does, he could be happy for the rest of his life; however, this is not to be. The diarist feels himself moving into the religious sphere; he is not yet there, but he feels a powerful force pulling him in that direction. Asking her to come with him into the absurd, he feels, would be too much of a burden for her, and so he is forced to break things off. Much of the diary laments this event. "It is not with her, it is not with Eros that I must struggle," he writes. "It is religious crises that are gathering over me. My life-view has become ambiguous—how, I cannot as yet say" (216). This ambiguity is a symptom that he is nearly ready to leap fully into the absurd; the rules of this world, of logic and law, no longer make sense to him.

That he does break things off with her marks him as something close to one of Kierkegaard's "knights of faith"; however, he does not yet display Abraham's trust of God—and who does?—but instead ends up as a "knight of resignation," doing what is asked of him but resigning himself to loss instead of trusting God to restore his loss to him, in other words, to spare Isaac's sacrifice. Still, he has done a remarkable thing, an action which might even have brought him fully into the religious sphere, since Kierkegaard is somewhat vague about what exactly puts a person into it. One thing is certain however: the diarist's former betrothed functions in his mind as a sort of

temptation to him, a lure to lead him away from the religious and back into the ethical—a noble sphere, perhaps, but clearly not where he wants to be. The diarist therefore resists the pull his beloved has upon him—not because he views her as wicked in and of herself but rather because he feels himself destined for a different life.

Percy's existentialism can thus be viewed as a combination of the philosophies of Sartre, Heidegger, Marcel and a heavy dose of Kierkegaard. Sartre and Heidegger clearly delineate the problem to be solved, but it is only through the theologians that Percy finds the means to solve it. It is important to note at this point, however, that he by no means accepted Marcel and Kierkegaard *carte blanche*. Most notably, Tolson says that "Percy rejected the Dane's notion of the 'leap of faith.' *Credo quia absurdum est* seemed to Percy in itself nothing more than absurd. Faith was not absurd, in Percy's eyes, but wholly compatible with reason" (200). This rejection makes sense in light of Percy's biography, of course; he essentially read and reasoned his way into the Catholic Church while bedridden in the sanatorium. Such an adaptation of Kierkegaardian thought means that any reading of Percy's novels through the spheres of existence will have to be itself adapted, with the teleological suspension of the ethical being somewhat downplayed; however, I will argue that The Second Coming, at least, gives more credence to the suspension that perhaps its author did.

Buechner, on the other hand, comes to the "classic" existentialists primarily through his time spent at Union Theological Seminary, where he studied such existentialist theologians as Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. But Marie-Hélène Davies argues that Sartre's influence on Buechner is just as strong as any

theologian. He believes that mankind is ultimately free, but he adds on a certain Calvinist proviso: "unlike Camus and Sartre, Buechner does not think that salvation lies wholly in the hands of man. He believes that God holds the reins of man's destiny" (109). The will of man is therefore important for Buechner, but grace ultimately comes from outside the material and human world. God, who holds the fate of humanity in his hands, must bestow it upon man. In Lion Country, as in his other novels, this comes through an unusual source: a pedophile minister and his foul-mouthed, icy adopted daughter.

Both Percy and Buechner therefore use existentialist philosophy and theology to explore the intersection of sex and grace. Buechner, I will show, has a strict equation between the two—simply put, sex equals grace in Lion Country. Only Leo Bebb's indecent exposure is framed in negative terms in the novel, and even this is eventually seen as an avenue of grace and something to be in some sense emulated. Antonio's life apart from Christianity is shown to be celibate and lonely—once he breaks the spell of his virginity, he simultaneously enters the ethical and religious spheres, committing to Sharon Bebb, the Church of Holy Love, and Christ in one fell swoop. He is finally seen for what and who he is, in Buechner's terms, and in this way he is able to receive salvation. For Percy, however, sex is more problematic: Throughout The Last Gentleman, sex is a distraction for Will Barrett. He hopes it will draw him into the ethical sphere, but the woman he chooses, Kitty Vaught, is an aesthete, and so sex actually pulls him away from the ethical, much less the religious. In The Second Coming, however, sex is multifaceted. In the interim period between the novels, Will has married a woman for whom he apparently felt no desire (echoes here of Antonio's sexless bachelorhood), and while the promise of sex with Kitty Vaught (now Huger) draws him again toward the

aesthetic, sex with her daughter, Allison, both redeems his position in the ethical sphere and draws him on into the religious. In this manner, The Second Coming is something akin to a more mature Lion Country; sex is ultimately something that can serve as an avenue of grace, but it is not necessarily so. Because of this, Buechner's novel provides a useful starting point for understanding the more complex novels of Percy.

The first chapter of my thesis thus explores sex, desire and grace in Buechner's Lion Country. In the second chapter, I then move on to Percy's The Last Gentleman, which presents an opposing view to Buechner's novel. The third chapter focuses on Percy's The Second Coming. This novels extends the type of scenario Buechner sets up but complexifies and complicates it. It is important to note that existentialist philosophers rarely deal with sex. Percy and Buechner's novels therefore present an interesting continuation of Christian existentialist philosophy. If, as Marcel says, human connection serves as the channel through which people are freed from stasis, what does that connection look like in relationship to sex? I hope to answer this question here.

Lion Country: Virginity, Atheism and Stasis

"Ah, but I met this girl with the Holy Ghost."
- Bill Mallonee, "The Kidz on Drugz"

"Maybe our hunger to know each other fully naked is in the last analysis simply our hunger to know each other fully. I want to know you with all your defenses down, all your pretenses set aside, all your secrets laid bare. Then maybe I will be brave enough to lay myself bare so that at last we can lie naked together and unashamed."
- Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark

The intersection of sex, desire and grace that we see in a complicated fashion in Percy's novels appear much more simplistically in Frederick Buechner's 1971 novel Lion Country, the first novel in the so-called Book of Bebb. Lion Country and its three sequels—1972's Open Heart, 1974's Love Feast and 1977's Treasure Hunt—tell the story of Antonio Parr, who, when we first meet him at the outset of the first novel, is in a drifting, directionless haze in New York City. He is celibate, not for religious or ethical reasons but because he is unable to make a move on any woman, a state caused by his inability to make (and fear of making) any legitimate human connections. He is therefore stuck in alienation until he travels to a church run by Leo Bebb, a supposedly crooked minister whom he hopes to expose. Antonio instead ends up being broken out of his stasis when he finally makes a move and sleeps with Bebb's daughter, Sharon. At the same time, he finds himself grappling with religious longings and is eventually brought to salvation and faith through these same means.

As discussed in my introduction, the sort haze that Antonio floats in is typical of the existential hero—witness Will Barrett in Percy's The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming for an immediate example—and is indicative of angst, in Heideggerian,

terms or anxiety, in Kierkegaardian ones. When we meet Antonio, he is a 34-year-old secular celibate—perhaps even a virgin, although the text never says for sure—unable to hold down a job or even an interest for very long. Antonio refers to his constant drifting as his "periods": For example, at the beginning of the novel, he is in his "scrap-iron period" (5):

> Old ratchets, wheels, tongs, strappings, hasps, hinges and nails, whatever I could lay my hands on I would paint with Rustoleum black and then assemble in various interesting and I hoped entertaining ways. I resorted as little as possible to welding but used balance wherever I could or the natural capacity of one odd shape to fit somehow into or on top of or through another . . . Permanence, I believed, was the enemy, and no one . . . could say I failed to live my faith. (5).

The sculptures Antonio creates echo his life—even he says that they are "entirely autobiographical" (5)—just as people are free to rearrange his unwelded art into different positions and shapes, he is free to rearrange his life into new interests, perhaps even new personalities. He is nothing if not curious, nothing if not an aesthete.

He has few real relationships in his life and seems to exist primarily in Heidegger's being-against-one-another or Kierkegaard's aesthetic sphere. His best friend, with whom, it is strongly implied, he is in love, is a UN worker named Ellie. They have had a "seven-year understanding which promised to lead neither of us quickly anywhere" (6)—another image of stasis, though Ellie, committed to social justice in general and her job in particular, seems to be much more grounded than Antonio and perhaps is even part of the ethical. He goes to Ellie's apartment frequently, and the two "lay, if nothing else,

our plans" (6). Their relationship, although they are friends, is colored by extreme sexual frustration. Antonio would clearly like to sleep with her, but his existential stasis keeps him from making any sort of move.[4] His friendship with Ellie, in other words, does nothing to break him out of his rut and may in fact push him further into it. Sometimes when he is at her apartment, she plays the piano while he lies on the floor and watches her feet. It is this foot that I see most clearly, a rather generous-sized foot in a heelless brocade slipper working up and down the soft pedal" (6). The sexual imagery here is obvious—Ellie's fetishized foot working up and down, Antonio lying at her feet—but the passage speaks also of Antonio's stasis, with the soft pedal representing the blurring and dulling of life. Sexual frustration and stasis are thus here connected, and so it seems that Ellie's relationship has a negative effect on him.

The only other human relationship in Antonio's life is also a type of poison to him, doing little but reinforcing his existential stasis. His twin sister, Miriam, spends much of the novel dying of multiple myeloma in a hospital bed. The two are very close, as is expected of twins, but their very being twins makes the relationship somewhat odd: Buechner seems to present a twinned image of Antonio himself. His twin sister—a mirror image of himself—is dying and will in fact die by the end of the novel, and this seems to suggest that Antonio himself is dying somewhere spiritually or psychologically. Miriam's disease breaks her bone for no particular reason (88); her cigarettes taste like dust (88); she is barely cognizant of what is going on (11). All of these things are true of Antonio as well, albeit in a nonphysical sense.

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[4] In this, he may be even deeper in stasis than Kierkegaard's Seducer, as he seems to fear commitment so much that he will not seek even pleasure.

The novel begins with Antonio saying goodbye to one Leo Bebb, a minister who runs a mail-order diploma mill in Armadillo, Florida. Antonio sees an advertisement for Church of Holy Love in a newspaper and writes to Bebb for ordination but not because he is at all interested in the ministry or even the faith. Rather, he hopes to expose Bebb as a fraud: "I answered it [Bebb's ad] because I hoped that it would provide me with copy. I would set novels aside, I thought, and try my hand at journalistic exposé. I was ready, in other words, to try out yet another of my periods" (5). Antonio's ordination is therefore another attempt to break out of the existential stasis that so characterizes his life. Bebb seems to agree, although for totally different reasons. "I am here," he says, "to save your soul" (5), and indeed, as Antonio watches him walking down the steps to the subway, he views him "like Orpheus with his lyre, and in the dark they reach out their hands to him while up there at the entrance to the underworld I also reach out my hands" (3). Antonio also hints that destroying Bebb might not have been his only motivate for answering the advertisement:

> At every level I could have been held accountable on, it struck me as inspired rascality ripe for my exposing—except that I can believe now that in some subterranean way I may have been interested not only in exposing it but also perhaps in, shall we say, sampling it. (5)

Antonio is unaware at the time of his deeper motivations, which become obvious only in retrospect, but at the time of his answering the advertisement his subconscious recognizes his existential stasis, recognizes his curiosity that manifests itself in his "periods," and wishes for his soul to be saved. Bebb, the man he wishes to destroy, will do exactly this by the novel's end.

Antonio's desire for Bebb to save him first becomes evident through anger. Ellie, having combed through newspapers at the public library, tells him a horrifying event from Bebb's past:

> Bebb is standing in a side street near the back entrance to a restaurant . . . Some children are playing with a tennis ball. Bebb has on a white linen cap with a green-lined visor and little perforated panels at either side to let the air in . . . He is smiling his climactic magician's smile, his most effulgent and tight-hinged allez-oop of an H, as he reaches down with one hand to pull the rabbit out of his hat. Only it is not a rabbit that he pulls out and not a hat he pulls it out of. It is a bunch of white grapes. It is a handful of suet. (14)

Bebb exposed himself to those children on that beach, in other words, and, as Antonio eventually finds out, he went to jail for it for five years, doing what Bebb's assistant, Brownie, calls "the Lord's work" (47). Antonio's reaction to Bebb's crime is multifaceted. He is horrified, of course, and, teeth gritted, he declares, "That sonofabitch Bebb. I'll skin him alive if it's the last thing I do" (17). He seems to blame this "charlatan priest" (15) for all the problems in his life and perhaps in the world in general, specifically for Miriam's impending death: "If Bebb had been a real priest instead of a phony, he might have been able to help. I suppose that would be the briefest statement of it. Help who? Help Miriam and Tom in their dying, or at least help me in my helpless watching" (18). He looks to Bebb to cure his stasis, to save his soul as the minister himself put it, and when he learns of his past, he once again feels stuck and helpless.

Bebb, of course, cannot save Antonio's soul, since grace can come through but never from people, but Antonio seems unaware of this.

At the same time, Antonio has an odd sort of admiration for Bebb's indecent exposure. His own existential stasis has been explicitly connected to his virginity and to his inability to make a move on Ellie and thus presumably enter into the being-with-one-another and the ethical sphere. Antonio therefore sees Bebb's actions as a fighting against the undertow of stasis. As he sits in Ellie's apartment discussing Bebb, he envies the minister:

> I can't help wondering what extraordinary events would have followed and how both our lives might have been unimaginably changed if I had that exact point actually played Bebb there, stolen Bebb's act. By a kind of sympathetic magic, his crime had momentarily, in Ellie's eyes, become my crime, and what if in full view of those same eyes I had, like Bebb, committed it, pulled my own rabbit out of my own hat? (15)

Antonio's own inability for indecent exposure—and the implication seems to be that, to the modern world, real openness is indecent in the same way exposing oneself to a group of children is indecent—maintains the stasis that so defines his life, however—perhaps he is unable to "expose" himself to Ellie because he is afraid of true human connection, because he is stuck in Heideggerian being-against-one-another, because he is unwilling for her really to see him as he is. He longs for a real connection to Ellie, and so he envies Bebb's full exposure, as it were, but he cannot bring himself actually to do so himself. This conceit of hiddenness and exposure also applies to God—Antonio partially recognizes in retrospect that, during this period, he was subconsciously hungry for

salvation—however misdirected, since he also wanted to destroy Bebb and to observe the presumably titillating events at Holy Love—and so his inability for full exposure indicates that he cannot be honest with either himself or God.

Despite his being largely unaware of his motivations, Antonio remains drawn to Bebb. Antonio suddenly decides, after leaving Ellie's apartment, to take a train to Armadillo, Florida, to see Bebb's home operation. Part of this decision stems from his desire to "skin that sonofabitch alive," but at least as important is his being drawn to Bebb because of Bebb's lack of stasis, his vitality. Yet Antonio's trip southward does not initially fix anything; that he takes the train only reinforces his stasis, the fact of which he seems largely unaware:[5]

> It is what I like about trains. You are neither here nor there, and you are neither this nor that. You are in between. I mean in between not just in a geographical sense, of course, but like an actor waiting in the wings for his cue to re-enter, or a disembodied spirit drifting between incarnations like an unconfirmed rumor. (23)

Antonio's train ride to Florida, then, is a microcosm of his entire life. He sits in a seat in a liminal no-man's land, watching the world fly by through his window. He even has a near-miss of a sexual encounter on the train, further reinforcing his inability to move beyond the "being-against-one-another" that so defines his stasis. As he sits in his

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[5] Interestingly enough, that travel itself solves nothing subverts Frederick R. Karl's concept of "spatiality," of salvation through escape (particularly to the south and the west) and a search for the lost Garden of Eden. Karl says that "Americans abhor a vacuum and have, accordingly, structured a literature in which they can pursue the limitless . . . Success in America, in fact, is often measured in terms of mobility, not in the fruits" (31). This theme shows up in a huge number of American novels from 1940 to 1980, including Percy's Love in the Ruins, Jack Kerouac's On the Road, and John Updike's Rabbit, Run, but Buechner here reveals movement as insufficient in and of itself—only grace can heal existential crisis.

Also notable is an echo of Percy's essay on despair, "The Man on the Train," where the commuter is seen as the apotheosis of existential crisis.

roomette, a nearly naked girl buzzes him and informs him of the goings-on aboard the train, including dinner and a movie in the club car. When asked, she informs him that she is near the end of her shift, and says, "What I need now is a drink" (24). This is Antonio's opening, of course, and he seems to recognize it, but he is unable or unwilling to take advantage of it. He is left in utter stasis and alienation—"If the girl had never buzzed at my door," he says, "I would have been sitting there with nobody—zero. As it was, I was sitting there with minus one" (25)—with only his "what-ifs" to console him. He is all desire here and no sex, locked permanently into a self-destructive and isolating pattern. And instead of going to any of the activities aboard the train, instead of attempting to make connections with other people, he drinks three glasses of Scotch alone in his compartment and thinks about all the near-sexual encounters he has had in his 34 years.

At this point, the human connection (the being-with-one-another) that comes with the ethical sphere is not only beyond Antonio's grasp—it is actually frightening to him. He cannot open up. He is utterly alienated from those around him. His sleep, when it finally comes, is fitful, and he has a dream in which the girl in the bathing suit "reached out one hand toward me, but when I took it in mine, it turned out to be not a hand but a fish-hook" (27).[6] Human connection is here seen as the enemy, a threat. His second dream that night is a subconscious attempt at breaking out; he dreams he is standing on the beach during what is apparently Miriam's funeral, and as her ex-husband and sons watch, he strips down to naked:

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[6] The reference here is to an earlier event in the novel. Antonio comes home to find his cat, Tom, has gotten a fish-hook from one of his works of art stuck through his eyelid. The fish-hook therefore becomes a symbol of the damage that Heideggerian curiosity can enact upon those around the sufferer.

> I lay belly down in the warm sand and started trying to work myself slowly into it like a worm with the early bird hot on its tail. Harder and faster I pushed until suddenly I felt something unspeakable happening to me and cried out to them, "See me! See me!" as though my life depended on it, or perhaps what I cried out was "Semen! Semen!" (27)[7]

Antonio's wet dream explicitly connects sex with a desire to end alienation and designates that, although he is unable to do it, he dearly wishes to be "seen" (or to release his semen—in this novel the two are pretty much the same thing), to have his soul saved, to put an end to his existential stasis. In Lion Country, being seen for who one is (by God and by other people) is thus equivalent to salvation; it is the way one is opened up to receive grace from God.

And indeed, it seems that it is rather by fate or the hand of God that Antonio has come to Florida: "there was a sense of destiny—a feeling that, no matter what the circumstances, no matter if Tom had not tangled with the fish-hook, or even if I had not seen Bebb's ad, I was bound to end up here anyway" (32).[8] After he rents a car and cruises around Armadillo, he finds The Church of Holy Love almost by accident. Antonio enters the church uninvited and sits down to pray. As he is doing so, he is greeted by Brownie, Bebb's assistant, although the more appropriate term for him might be *butler*. Brownie serves Bebb and his wife, Lucille, for a living, and he seems to do this because Bebb broke him out of his own existential stasis, albeit in a much more literal way: "He has given me my life, dear. Leo Bebb raised me from the dead . . . I mean like

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[7] That Antonio apparently has a nocturnal emission suggests that he does not masturbate. He is unwilling to expose himself even to himself.

[8] Antonio's feeling that he was meant to come to Holy Love is an expression not of fatalism but of a rudimentary faith in God, who, for Buechner, "holds the reins of man's destiny" (Davies 109).

Lazarus. Dear, I was laid out in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Leo Bebb came in and raised me up" (95).[9] When Brownie retells the story of his resurrection, it has a certain sexual component to it:

> Mr. Bebb called out in a loud voice almost like he was mad, *"Brownie, you stand up!"* . . . Billy thought he saw something move. Now, because I am not telling this in mixed company, dear, but just to another member of the male sex, I do not mind telling you that what Billy said he first thought he saw move was my private parts—just a very faint movement down there the way it can happen sometimes for no reason. (98)

Sex, or at least the arousal of the male organ itself, is the first indication of an end to stasis, of resurrection. This will hold true for Antonio as well, as we shall see later in the novel.

Bebb is out of town when Antonio arrives in Armadillo, but he has given Brownie instructions as to what to do when Antonio came—this is a true act of prophecy, as Antonio himself had no idea that he would visit until just before he did so. Throughout the novel, Bebb seems to see things in people that are only true at the very depth of their being, things that they are not even aware of themselves. The most obvious example is of

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[9] There is some suggestion in the novel that Brownie is a homosexual. For one thing, there is the obvious scatological connotation of his name, reinforced later when Bebb says that "The Almighty gave Brownie life, and Brownie never lived it. He just shoved it up his ass" (94) and asks him when he is going to get married. If this is accurate, Bebb seems not to believe that homosexual sex is capable of ending stasis, although Buechner himself contradicts this elsewhere: "To say that morally, spiritually, humanly, homosexuality is always bad seems as absurd as to say that in the same terms heterosexuality is always good . . . It is not the object of our sexuality that determines its value but the inner nature of our sexual . . . If it involves some measure of kindness, understanding, affection as well as desire, it can become an expression of human love in its fullness and can thus help to complete us as humans" (Whistling 68). (This contradiction could also be explained by Buechner's feeling that he needed to make amends for his homophobic attitude in the early 1970s.) Indeed, it was a homoerotic relationship that literally brought Brownie back to life, with Bebb laying hands on him and with him achieving an erection.

Herman Redpath, an incredibly wealthy Houston oilman who shows interest in the Church of Holy Love. Bebb describes Redpath in glowing terms:

> Texas is not only a big state but Texas has got some big men in it. Ever heard of Herman Redpath? . . . Herman Redpath is a big man from a big state. And you talk about your Christians, why . . . that Herman Redpath is what I call a *Christian*. The Lord doesn't make them much like that any more. Why, all that man thinks about is giving. (58)

When Redpath shows up in Florida later in the novel, however, it appears that Bebb is an idiot or perhaps just money-hungry and obsequious. Redpath is not in fact a big man; he stands "little higher than a child" (107). Nor would he fit in with social expectations of a Christian: He speaks in one long stream of obscenities and vulgarities and seems to regard Christianity itself with a certain amount of disdain:

> You take your Ezekials and your Jeremiahs and your Saint Paul the Apostles with all your kiss-my-ass Holy joes Leo he says they were always seeing God places he was always popping out at them got up like a wheel with eyes for spokes or some other damn thing a blinding light far as I can see they must have spent their whole life shitting in their pants. (106)

Redpath, too, seems to have been freed from stasis by Bebb and frames it in sexual terms: "Leo here says it's God does it the holy damn spirit who gives a fart what he calls it I like him he doesn't kiss my ass like the rest of them do they say he's done time so what if he's done time when he lays his hands on you you get it up" (106). Even if he is a little rough around the edges, Redpath turns out to be the generous person Bebb believes him

to be; at the end of the novel, he invites Bebb to live with him at his palatial estate, giving him far more money than anyone would have expected that the Church of Holy Love, would ever have received.

Bebb's gift, it seems, is seeing things deep inside of people that they are unaware of in the midst of their stasis and angst, then "laying hands on them," to put it in both sexual and spiritual terms, freeing them from their crises and drawing out who they really are. It is hinted in the novel that this is because Bebb is an angel. At the outset of the novel, Bebb becomes fascinated with a man in the lunchette where he meets Antonio:

> The man at the counter who took our order had silvery hair and a silvery, ageless face. "You know what he is, don't you?" Bebb asked . . . "That one there," he said, nodding back over his shoulder. "He's from outer space." I had raised the teacup to my lips, and Bebb put one bitten thumb on the near rim of the saucer, pushing down to make the far rim rise. "He got here in one of these. *Maybe*." (4)

Bebb says that aliens walk over all the earth. "In Scripture they are called angels. There's quite a few of them around and always have been, but they don't mean us any harm. Often just the opposite" (4). When Antonio is at Bebb's house in Armadillo, he talks to Bebb's wife Lucille, a depressed middle-aged woman who spends all day drinking "Tropicanas" (two parts orange juice, one part gin) and watching a burned-out television while wearing dark sunglasses. They talk about Bebb's angels, and Antonio asks her if she believes they are from outer space. "Do you know what I believe?" she replies. "I believe it takes one to know one. Sometimes I believe Bebb is from outer space himself"

(43). At the very least we are expected to believe that Bebb was touched by the hand of God, since he sees visions and has the power to heal.

He seems to have already begun healing Antonio. After dinner and a tour of the "college" housed in Bebb's garage, Antonio prepares to go back to his room at the Salamander Motel, a name which suggests the subterranean, the amphibian and ultimately hell. Brownie asks him if he would like to take a book back to the motel with him. Antonio's choice is The Apocryphal New Testament, edited by Montague Rhodes James (an actual book by a real-life medieval scholar best known for writing ghost stories). Antonio chooses this book on the strength of its "sober biographical note of Montague Rhodes James himself" (47): "It was to his sane and orderly scrutiny that I wanted to submit the chaotic mass of impressions that I had gathered from my first day in Armadillo" (48). Antonio, having been at Holy Love for only one day, already desires the stability that he fled for so long in the false freedom of curiosity.

Antonio reads several of the stories in The Apocryphal New Testament, including, tellingly, "The Book of the Cock," but the one he spends most of his energy on is a section of the Gospel of Nicodemus called "The Descent Into Hell." Buechner presents this section as an opera, a counterpart to Mozart's Don Giovanni.[10] "The Descent Into Hell" opens in hell, with all of the major characters of the Old Testament deep in suffering. While reading the text, Antonio begins to imagine himself and Miriam as children, watching this opera at the Met—this imagining is clearly an identification with the souls in hell; it is a recognition of his own hell, his existential stasis. In the midst

[10] An intriguing choice, since Mozart's opera is Kierkegaard's example of the ideal work for the aesthete. Antonio likely envies the great seducer, and that partially explains his comparison. However, that he sets "The Descent Into Hell" up as a counter-example suggests that he is at last moving beyond the "curiosity" of the aesthetic sphere, out of stasis.

of this suffering, however, Christ enters the scene. "Even Montague James," Antonio says, "must have had to sit on his hands from putting in a footnote to the effect that at this moment all Hell breaks loose" (55). Christ is presented in the text less as the traditional shepherd of Renaissance paintings than as "Don Giovanni, the great lover himself." Hell, Satan and the demons accost him, but "Jesus' response is a model of directness. He simply takes his rapier and runs Satan through the shoulder with it, not to kill him but to render him helpless" (55). Christ speaks for the first time, saying only, "Come unto me, all ye my saints which bear mine image and likeness!" (56). The patriarchs come and fall at Christ's feet in tears until one cannot even see him behind all of them. " 'Sing unto the Lord a new song,' David cries out, 'for he hath done marvelous things.' And the entire company replies with 'Amen! Alleluia!' as the curtain comes down" (56). Antonio does not read the epilogue of the text, saying "I preferred to go to sleep with the echo of David's last cry and that final rousing chorus still ringing in my ears" (56). His connection to the "Descent Into Hell" is a further recognition of his own stasis, his own need to be saved, and Montague Rhodes James has given him his first real glimmer of hope that this task can be accomplished.

Significantly, Antonio wakes up from this dream of redemption with Bebb staring into his face. He had to wash and dry his pajamas from his wet dream on the train, so he is naked under the sheets—showing true vulnerability for the first time in the novel and symbolically beginning his move from the being-against-one-another to the being-with-one-another, from the aesthetic to the ethical and religious spheres. "You'll have to excuse me for busting in on you like this," Bebb tells him, "but it's after eleven. I was afraid you might be dead" (56). Antonio was in fact dead in a manner of speaking,

reading through the harrowing of hell and longing for redemption; Bebb's presence in the room the next morning signifies the first seeds of this redemption, the beginning of his move out of stasis. Bebb stretches out his hand,

> which I had to crawl out of the covers to shake . . . when I look back on our second historic meeting as it took place in Armadillo, what I see is Bebb, the International President, standing there in his sober Mother Church suit and myself half crouching on the bed as naked as the day my poor mother bore me. We are reaching out over the covers toward each other, and our two hands are just touching. It is a picture which belongs in the Sistine Chapel. (57)

This echo of Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam," combined with Antonio's reading of the Gospel of Nicodemus the night before, only reinforces his initial impression of Bebb as Orpheus descending into the underworld. That Antonio is naked at the time, meanwhile, reinforces that it is sex that will serve as the avenue for his salvation.

What ends up being more important for Antonio, however, is that his stasis will begin to end on this day. Bebb takes him back to his house and introduces him to his adopted daughter, Sharon. As they wait in Bebb's tail-finned convertible for her to emerge from the house, Bebb turns on the radio, and so Antonio's memories of Sharon are forever entwined with the Big Bopper's 1958 smash hit "Chantilly Lace." He is lost in the song when he feels a tap on his shoulder. Sharon whispers "Big Bopper" into his ear, and he falls instantly in love with her. The three hit the open road, and Bebb decides to take them to Lion Country Safari, a real "cageless zoo" in Loxahatchee, Florida, where lions roam free in an outdoor habitat and cars drive through close enough to touch them.

These uncaged lions become a symbol of freedom from existential stasis, and it is important that this symbol comes during Antonio's first date with Sharon. "A lion," says Bebb, "feels a cage just like a man would—more . . . a lion feels it more than your average man would because he's the king of the jungle. Five years, ten years, fifteen years. Think of it, Antonio. A king in a cage all that time, just wearing his claws off" (65). Antonio thinks of his cat, Tom, in the cage at the veterinarian's office, but he could just as easily think about himself, trapped for "Five years, ten years, fifteen years" in the prison cage of his own head, unable to break out, unable to make legitimate connections, unable to be redeemed.

> Their trip through the park becomes a sort of religious experience for Antonio:
>
> At first it was like a zoo. We were here and the lions were there, and if you'd seen one lion, I thought, you'd seen them all, and the lions looked as though they had exactly the same feeling about people. But little by little this changed, although I couldn't say why. Little by little it began to get to me that they were lions and that they were here and that we were here, too. (66)

Antonio's aesthetic curiosity has been transformed into a religious sense of wonder at the things around him; his move out of stasis has begun. Of course, his wonder pales in comparison to Bebb's, who urges him to get out of the car and take a picture, and when he fails to do so, gets out himself.

> With an almost mystical smile, I thought, as though answering voices from on high, the most majestic of the male lions sauntered over to one of the females and mounted her. There didn't seem to be any passion about it

> as far as I could tell, but on the other hand it didn't seem perfunctory either—rather like two old friends seeking refreshment in each other's company toward the middle of a hot afternoon. Bebb swung my camera around and, as nearly as I could tell, got his shot in before they uncoupled. (68)

This passage—the climax, if you will, of the scene at the safari—brings together many of the novel's themes. There is the obvious sexual dimension: Bebb takes a picture (itself framed in sexual terms, as "got his shot in") of two lions having sex. Furthermore, there is a religious dimension to the passage, as the lion has a "mystical smile" and as Bebb, always so connected to sex and religion, is so moved by the action that he actually gets out of the car. There is the freedom of the lions, who are after all not held in cages, and this freedom becomes entwined with their sexual act. And then there is Bebb, in the middle of it all and unafraid—he is further connected with both freedom from stasis and with sex.

Meanwhile, Antonio is becoming increasingly attached to Bebb, Sharon and the Church of Holy Love. Sitting with Sharon at a hot-dog stand outside the safari, he tries "to imagine Ellie and Lucille meeting, or Ellie and Brownie—it would be like the encounter of matter and anti-matter, I decided, one simply canceling the other quite out of existence" (69). Ellie may not be poisonous for Antonio, but she is an aspect of the stasis he is beginning in Armadillo to leave behind; she is already starting to fade in his mind, especially as he begins to grow closer to Sharon. While they are eating lunch, Antonio chokes on a hamburger and coughs a piece up, and it hits her right in the eye. Much to his surprise,

> She didn't make much of it, didn't laugh or exclaim or anything like that, but the puzzled frown was shattered by that always surprising smile of hers—the smile of a gondolier who knows he has overcharged you and knows that you know—and what I understood her to be saying as she wiped at her cheek with the back of her hand was that something half-chewed had flown out of my mouth and hit her in the eye, and all in all, like Bebb's lions taking their pleasure by the water hole, it wasn't a bad idea for an afternoon with nothing much else to do. (69-70)

Sharon's reaction—tied up with another description of the lion's copulation—is an indicator of a sort of communion between her and Antonio. If any action would be likely to set off the being-against-one-another, it is this one; that Sharon does not react in anger shows him that maybe he can expose himself to her.

He does expose himself to her, both emotionally and literally: Bebb drops Antonio and Sharon off at the motel, saying that he is expecting a call from Herman Redpath. He hands Antonio some cash and tells him to take Sharon out for dinner. They do not maker it there, however; instead, Sharon says, "I feel like I've got lion all over me. How's about I come on in and wash up?" (71). Sharon's request, connected with the image of the two lions copulating earlier, is clearly a come-on, and that Antonio obliges shows again that he is starting to make an actual connection with her. His room is a disaster area: The pajamas he washed out from his wet dream are draped over a chair, the bedclothes are on the floor, and he has a bottle of Scotch on the windowsill. In a way, the messiness of Antonio's room and his willingness to let Sharon come in anyway

demonstrate his increased ability to and interest in exposing himself and in making genuine human connections.

What happens next is what finally draws Antonio out of his stasis and allows him to act (or rather, to commit to a particular act), to "pull his rabbit out of his hat," as he earlier describes Bebb's crime. When Sharon comes out of the bathroom wearing only a towel, Antonio makes a move for what may be the first time in his life:

> I remember how far away and almost detached I felt as I reached up with one hand and touched the place just below her shoulder where she had the towel tucked in on itself and how at my touch the towel didn't fall straight to the floor as you might suppose but sideways and quite slowly, catching for a moment on the way down. (75)

They make love, then, and Antonio frames it as a religious experience, paraphrasing Psalm 139: "If I forget thee, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth" (75). Having sex with Sharon—and perhaps more importantly, the action he took in touching her towel—has begun to break him out of his stasis. The night before, he read the Harrowing of Hell in The Gospel of Nicodemus; tonight, he is actually brought out of his own existential hell by Sharon—and apparently by Bebb as well. As he takes Sharon home later in the evening, he pulls the money Bebb gave him for dinner out of his pocket, and it turns out to be only a five. "I guess he didn't expect us to eat much" (79), says Sharon, and it appears that Bebb wanted Antonio to sleep with his adopted daughter, for his salvation or for hers or perhaps for both, as though he knew that their coupling would result in vulnerability (and eventually, love) rather than something crass and meaningless.

The next day, Antonio abruptly returns to New York City, the site of his stasis, as, perhaps a test of his new life. He calls his sister Miriam, who, forgetting that he is in Florida, asks him to bring her sons to see her at the hospital. The boys' father, Charlie, is even more a symbol of existential stasis than Antonio was at the outset of the novel. Miriam calls her ex-husband a "bleeding ghost" (21), and that description seems accurate, as he lives in a sort of dream world but still suffers intense emotional pain. He is apparently a bad influence on the boys, as well; when they are living with Charlie, Antonio says that "there was something fairy-like about them—something transparent and insubstantial, a spidery quietness that seemed more than just shyness" (21). The older boy, Chris, is later described as "a shadow of the shadow who was his father" (83). Charlie, then, is so in stasis that his mere presence in other people's lives is enough to suck them into stasis as well, and in this way, he functions in the novel as a sort of anti-Bebb, who is so alive that those around him can't help but break out of their prisons. Indeed, Miriam tells Antonio that in bed Charlie is "both importunate and oddly passionless, as though, like sleep, he find her body desirable not in itself but as a way of escape" (22). Sex, because it is unconnected to connection, fails to break Charlie out of his stasis and succeeds only in pushing him further into it. The distinction is important, as it is not the mere physical act of intercourse that allows Antonio to seek grace, commitment and salvation—it is the vulnerability and nakedness involved in it.

At any rate, Antonio takes the first plane he can get from West Palm Beach to New York, and he meets Charlie and the boys "under the clock at the Biltmore" (82). Charlie has failed to inform the boys how sick their mother really is, and they are

unaware that this will probably be the last time they ever see her alive. Charlie, on the other hand, is completely uninterested in seeing his ex-wife:

> He said, "I'll tell you how it was with me, Tono," and his faded blue eyes took on a faraway look as though he was remembering some old script he had worked on for educational TV. "I'd like to go up there with you in many ways, but in another way I'd rather not. You see, I prefer to remember her the way she was."

Before his experience of exposure with Sharon, Antonio—stuck in stasis as he was—might have let this go, but it is significant that he confronts Charlie here, not in the sense of being-for-one-another but in the sense of being-with-one-another; he is not looking out for himself but for Miriam and perhaps for Charlie as well:

> That's great for you, Charlie. You'll be able to keep your happy memories intact that way. But suppose everybody decided the same thing? Then everybody would stay away so they could remember her the way she was and she would die all alone there the way she is . . . What she told me was she thought she could take it all right, but she didn't think you could. (84)

Antonio's speech wakes Charlie up, if only for a moment:[11] "It was the first time since we had started talking that he looked fully awake" (84). He ends up being too scared to go, and Antonio comforts him—another sign that, since being saved through his encounter with Sharon in the Salamander Motel, he is much more interested in genuine human connections.

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[11] Antonio only wakes Charlie up for a short period of time, but it is notable that he wakes him up at all; he is gaining Bebb's status as Orpheus, drawing people out of the Underworld.

Another positive development is that Antonio finally seems willing to fulfill Miriam's desire for him to adopt her children after her death; he dismissed this idea earlier in the novel, probably because he was so adrift in stasis. He takes Chris and Tony to see their mother for the last time, and Miriam's last words to Tony are deep with meaning:

> *Stay awake*, she told him as we left, and part of what she had in the back of her mind, I suppose, was poor Charlie with his naps and his kapok pillows sleeping his life away. *Stay awake* were the last words she spoke to my younger nephew and namesake, and looking back on it, not just the words but the fire inside them, what I think she meant was stay alive. (89)

First of all, that Miriam says "stay awake" to Tony, Antonio's namesake, implies that it is her brother, too, she wants to stay awake; he has told her about the harrowing of hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus, and she has likely noticed his break from stasis and wants him to hold on to it. Secondly, that Tony's tiredness is so bound up in Charlie reiterates that Miriam wants her boys out of his house; that Antonio makes this connection implies that he is willing to take on this burden, particularly now that he is himself awake.

His awakeness also leads to his finding a new residence, a new home. Antonio leaves the hospital room and drops the boys off with their father, then immediately catches a flight back to West Palm Beach, saying that "I had not realized when I left how homesick I would be for Armadillo" (89). The Church of Holy Love is now in a real sense his home, as it is the place he has moved from being-against-one-another to being-with-one-another. He is awakened the next day in his room at the Salamander Motel by Sharon, who is standing naked in front of his bed. They make love again, "long enough to

be quiet and still for a little while too" (90)—an important level of intimacy, as it implies a further letting down of one's guard. "It's nice to come together this way" (90), says Sharon—it is nice, in other words, to connect with someone else, to be broken out of the stasis that has presumably characterized her life the way it has Antonio's. The two drive to the church, where Bebb and Brownie are frantically making preparations for Herman Redpath's ordination. The three of them talk for a long time about a variety of topics, but the most important involves Brownie, existential stasis and sex:

> Now, you take a man like Brownie, Antonio, and you ask yourself where the Almighty went wrong. Well, I tell you it's not the Almighty went wrong, it's Brownie went wrong. The Almighty gave Brownie life, and Brownie never lived it. He just shoved it up his ass . . . What have you got against getting married, Brownie? The trouble with you is the only sex you get is in the bathtub. (94-95)

Bebb, at least, believes that Brownie has wasted the new life God has given him through Bebb, that he has never lived but instead remained in stasis his entire life—and this, of course, is connected with his eternal bachelorhood. Antonio, the eternal bachelor until he met Bebb's daughter, serves as a contrast to Brownie's life. Indeed, while Bebb says this, Antonio keeps "thinking in the back of my head that not an hour earlier I had been in bed with his daughter, and not for the first time and probably not for the last time either" (95). It is not unreasonable to think that Antonio instead sees that this has freed him from Brownie's life as Bebb described it. In fact, Bebb takes Antonio aside and asks him to take Sharon to the beach. This raises further questions in Antonio's mind:

> Did he know as he stood there under the cross mopping sweat that we had already made holy love together, the warmth of his heart and I? Was that why he'd invited me down to Armadillo in the first place? "I am here to save your soul, Antonio Parr," he had said back there on Lexington Avenue in the rain. Or Sharon's soul? Or both? (101)

The answer to these questions appears to be *yes*, that Bebb did want to save Antonio's soul and to break him out of stasis and that the only way he saw to do this was to set him up with Sharon.

The trip to the beach does not go well, however, and Antonio begins slipping back into his old ways. He thinks of Ellie's reports of her own trips to Florida beaches and her disapproval of them, and he starts to feel disconnected: "I thought of how I myself belonged neither to their world nor to Ellie's nor to Sharon's either but how, like my scrap-iron sculpture, I could be arranged in different ways to suit different worlds (102-103). And sleeping in his room at the Salamander later that afternoon, he notes that "You don't lose the habits of a lifetime all in a minute, and for the space at least of that long nap . . . I returned to my celibacy and my bachelor solitude with a zest no less keen for knowing that they would not last forever" (103). Antonio's soul is indeed being saved, but it is a process, not the instantaneous harrowing of hell he perhaps expected. In the meantime, he occasionally slips back into celibacy and bachelorhood—into, in other words, stasis. It is important, however, that these slips are no longer the norm but exceptions. As he approaches them with "zest"—connected with religious wonder rather than aesthetic curiosity, it is further implied that they are not a full re-immersion into his

old life. He has made incredible progress in just a few days, even if he has not completely arrived at his destination.

What pulls him away from the "celibacy and bachelor solitude" of his sleep at the Salamander Motel is Herman Redpath's ordination. When he gets to Bebb's house, the place is packed full of Herman's friends and relatives, as well as the foul-mouthed, fast-talking oil baron himself. When it comes time for the ceremony, Bebb leaves Antonio and Sharon alone at the house to direct any further visitors to the church; he must know what this will result in: the two retreat to Sharon's room and make love and so lose themselves in the moment that they miss the ordination. Theirs is a sort of religious ceremony—a further connection, a further drawing out of stasis and into grace. If sleeping with Sharon initially harrowed Antonio's hell, the further connections he makes with her deepen his immersion in the religious sphere.

"And then all hell broke loose," says Antonio.[12] The ordination was a disaster in many respects. The church was packed out with Herman Redpath's friends and relatives, reporters and also a group of "hard-shell Baptists who were there primarily for the music" (110). Everyone sings, Bebb prays, and Brownie gives a sermon. Finally, at the climax of the ceremony, Bebb prays over Herman Redpath and ordains him, and then

> Bebb stepped back a few steps from Herman Redpath and, raising first his face, pale and moist as cheese, he started slowly to raise his arms also until like great white wings they were stretched up on either side as far as they would go . . . it was at this moment rather than earlier that it first became

[12] This is the same term Antonio applied to the harrowing of hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus, implying that what happens at the ordination is something similar.

> apparent during all the time he had been raising his arms, his white robe had been coming farther and farther apart up the middle until here, as his arms reached their zenith, it could be clearly seen that the veil of the Temple had been rent asunder and the Holy of Holies exposed. (112)

That this happens during Redpath's ordination and that Bebb's exposure is couched in such religious terms implies that there is more here than a simple accidental or even intentional flashing. Antonio calls the incident "something seismic" (112), and it really appears to have a certain religious significance; at the same time as these events, Antonio and Sharon are upstairs having sex, the action that has been coded as breaking them out of their stases. And despite early fears of lawsuits and possibly even more jail time, Bebb's exposure, his being-with-one-another rather than being-against-one-another leads to a better lifestyle for him, Brownie and Lucille, and an enormous donation to the Church of Holy Love.

Antonio leaves Armadillo for New York deep in depression, terrified, no doubt, that his new home has been split to splinters by Bebb's indecent exposure. Bebb, meanwhile, disappears. Antonio fears he has been sent to prison or has run away on the lam until he talks to Brownie, who tells him in biblical code that Bebb, Lucille and Sharon are with Herman Redpath in Houston. When Antonio flies to Texas to see them, Herman Redpath explains:

> That sonofabitch Bebb I don't give a fart what he is or what he did time for all I know is soon as we got back here that same day after he pulled Jesus knows what-all kind of a crazy damn trick damn if the thing didn't start working right off the line the Jesus life any name you want to call it

> why I'll kiss your ass if that same night we got back I didn't get one on stiff as a poker must have lasted the better part of twenty minutes maybe more . . . I spend the life I got you take that Leo Bebb I don't give a fart what he done time for he gives me back the life again every week he lays his hands on me. (124)

Bebb's exposure is not in fact a disaster but instead a type of miracle; it breaks Herman Redpath out of stasis, much in the same way that having sex with Bebb's daughter breaks Antonio out. Bebb's gift is to give new life to people, to wake them up, to be an avenue of the grace that allows them to live each day, and he seems to accomplish this almost wholly through sexual means.

He does eventually save Antonio Parr's soul, then, just the way he promised upon their first meeting in that diner in New York City. He breaks him out of the prison of his stasis and allows him to live a life of actual commitment and community that flies in the face of the flitting curiosity of his "periods"—he proposes to Sharon while he is visiting her in Houston, and she recognizes the avenue of the grace that frees them both:

> "Bip put you up to this, didn't he?"
>
> I said, "Bip certainly had his hand in things right from the beginning. There's no getting around that."
>
> "Didn't he?" Sharon said.
>
> "Not in so many words," I said. (125)

The two are married, then, and return to the Northeast, the site of Antonio's stasis for so many years. But instead of succumbing to it, they build a new life built on the religious and the ethical. They live in Connecticut, while Antonio retires from his "periods" and

begins teaching high-school English full-time. When Miriam dies, silent and shut-off inside of a full length body cast ("*Let's get the hell out of here*" [117]), Antonio imagines her saying), they adopt Chris and Tony. Sharon and Antonio are finally and at long last freed, free to live in the being-with-one-another, as free as the great cats at the Lion Country Safari.

Lion Country makes an interesting "introduction" to Percy's The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming for a number of reasons. For one thing, its treatment of the themes of existential crisis and sexuality is a simplified version of Percy's, even though they eventually come to the same conclusion. At no point in Lion Country does sex function as a negative, except inasmuch as Antonio is unable to go through it. In Percy's novels, on the other hand, sex is complicated—Percy uses the trope of the Kierkegaardian spheres to paint sex as both negative and positive; with Kitty Vaught Huger, it pulls him into the aesthetic and the ethical, but with Allison Huger, it pulls him into the religious. If we apply the Kierkegaardian spheres to Lion Country, sex functions only to pull Antonio out of the aesthetic and into a combined ethical and religious sphere. That is, making his move on Sharon allows him both to commit to her and to receive a certain sort of salvation, made accessible to him both through sex and through his time at the Church of Holy Love. Still, the end result of the novels are the same: the protagonist is brought by sex into religious faith and true stability, out of the Heideggerian being-against-one-another into the being-with-one-another, out of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic and into the religious.

The Last Gentleman: Sex as Damnation

"We were never making love."
- Steven Page, "In the Car"

"Depart from me, you unclean spirit!
My honor, my pride order me to believe her;
my depression is on the lookout for the most
secret idea therein lest I be allowed to sneak
away from something."
- Søren Kierkegaard, Stages on Life's Way

As mentioned earlier, Percy's The Second Coming uses Kierkegaard's trope of the spheres of existence to paint a picture of Will Barrett, a man adrift in stasis who receives grace and comes to salvation. The channel for grace and salvation is sex and commitment to a woman. Before this can happen, however, The Second Coming's protagonist, Will Barrett, is pulled away from salvation, also by means of sex, and Percy's second novel, The Last Gentleman is the story of Barrett's free floating through the world, looking at all of the spheres of existence and settling on none of them. In settling on none of them, however, he ends up in the aesthetic, the sphere of curiosity and drift. His life in The Last Gentleman is the Wilderness before the Promised Land that he finds in The Second Coming; it is the cross before the crown. Will's stasis, like Antonio's, comes from his position in the aesthetic sphere; he drifts aimlessly through his life in a sort of depressed curiosity, unable to commit to any particular personality. He displays longings and leanings toward the ethical and religious spheres, and he occasionally recognizes the failure of the aesthetic sphere, but he is nevertheless unable to move out of it. His attempts at doing so are failures—first, he attempts to move into the ethical with Kitty Vaught, a fellow aesthete who has no interest in doing so; then, he

latches on to Kitty's brother Sutter, a remarkably aware aesthete who points out the problems to Will but cannot give him a solution.

Before I begin my discussion of these two Percy novels, however, it is important that I discuss how Percy modifies Kierkegaard's spheres of existence. Percy's distrust of the modern age is perhaps even more pronounced than Kierkegaard's, and the Percyian spheres of existence must be laid out around this distrust. The aesthetic sphere does not change much from Kierkegaard's formulation—it is still bound up in hedonism and the fear of boredom, although this hedonism, following the sexual revolution in the 1960s, manifests itself in casual sex and the loss of feeling more than in seduction per se. The ethical sphere, for Percy, is typified by art and particularly by science; he calls the scientist the "prince and sovereign of the age" (Percy, Lost 115) but presents both artist and scientist as secular priests, trusting fully in their ideas. Percy does not negate Kierkegaard's definition of the ethical as a commitment to almost anything, however, but merely clarifies it: The ethical as a commitment to old-fashioned values is also common in his work. For example, in The Last Gentleman, the idea of a Southern Gentleman is an example of an ethical idea—Barrett's forefathers were all gentleman, all committed to honor, but as the generations wear on, the Barretts become less and less capable of this. The Percyan religious sphere is more complicated. Being out of step with society often seems to be enough for one of Percy's characters to be religious—in The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming in particular, characters exist in the religious sphere without believing per se in God—once they are free from hedonism and the bounds of science and society, they are in some sense religious. Percy's religious sphere is not Kierkegaard's ultimate belief but instead a sort of ultimate disbelief: Once a person

rejects society's hedonism and false commitments, he is religious by default, since he has nowhere else to turn except God.

Percy himself has said that, in The Last Gentleman, Williston Bibb Barrett "really existed in what Kierkegaard would call the religious mode. He was a real searcher. He was after something. He was clinging to a piece of wood, a floating spar; he's a drowning man clutching at straws, really on the ragged edge" (Carr 66-67). It seems to me, however, that Percy is only partially right—The Last Gentleman itself supports instead the idea that Barrett is unable to commit, a "searcher" in the sense of Heideggerian curiosity. He is aware of his stasis and desperately wishes to break out of it but cannot commit to anything long enough to do so. This explains why he is something of a ghost; he cannot commit to anything, neither God nor science nor art nor even hedonism.[13] He lives instead in "a state of pure possibility, not knowing what sort of man he was or what he must do, and supposing therefore that he must be all men and do everything" (Percy, Gentleman 4). Possibility, rather than energizing Will, paralyzes him. He is unable to act because he has "to know everything before he could do anything" (4). Will's stasis leads to what is referred to in the novel as his "condition." Simply put, he has completely lost all sense of his own identity and is forced to create one for himself. His moving to New York City from Alabama is a symptom rather than the cause of this problem:

> New York is noted for the variety and number of the groups with which one might associate, so that even a normal person sometimes feels dislocated. As a consequence this young man, dislocated to begin with,

[13] That Barrett cannot commit even to non-commitment sets him apart from Antonio Parr—Barrett frequently displays signs of Heideggerian curiosity and is essentially in stasis, but his stasis is not exactly like Antonio's, since his longing for stability is often as strong or stronger than his desire to shape-shift.

> hardly knew who he was from one day to the next. There were times when he took roles so successfully that he left off being who he was and became someone else. (20)

This is a clear manifestation of Heideggerian "curiosity" or the lack of self-definition Kierkegaard describes as intrinsic to the aesthetic sphere. Will is miserable in this state, and it is clear throughout the novel that he would like nothing more than to enter into the ethical stage, to commit to some idea or person and to live his life in dedication thereto. This would, as Kierkegaard suggests, paradoxically allow him to define himself internally rather than by his various curiosities.

The novel's title refers to this desire. The Barrett family history is the story of a decreasing commitment to the ethical, in this case to the concepts of the Old South and southern honor:

> It was an honorable and violent family, but gradually the violence had been deflected and turned inward. The great grandfather knew what was what and said so and acted accordingly and did not care what anyone thought. He even wore a pistol in a holster like a Western hero and once met the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in a barbershop and invited him then and there to shoot it out in the street. (9)

Clearly, Will's great-grandfather was an old-style Southern Gentleman, willing and able to defend his honor (and the honor of others) to the death.

The law of diminishing returns takes effect with each successive generation, however:

> The next generation, the grandfather, seemed to know what was what but he was not really so sure. He was brave but he gave much thought to the business of being brave. He too would have shot it out with the Grand Wizard if only he could have made certain it was the thing to do. The father was a brave man too and he said he didn't care what others thought, but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and to be thought well of by other people. So living for him was a strain. He became ironical. (9-10)

Whereas Great-Grandfather Barrett was fully committed to an ethical idea, his son and grandson each move further and further away from that commitment, leaving us finally with our protagonist, truly the "last gentleman": "He did not know what to think. So he became a watcher and a listener and a wanderer. He could not get enough of watching" (10). This constant watching keeps him from any sort of commitment (the ethical) and also from the sort of blind hedonism (the aesthetic) practiced by other characters in the novel—he is out of step with his society, and this is a good sign in Percy's formulation.

What Will is looking for, it appears, is a sign, and it does not seem to matter to him from what source that sign arrives. Will does not believe in God, or in anything else, really: "But what am I, he wondered: neither Christian nor pagan nor proper lusty gentleman, for I've never really got the straight of this lady-and-whore business. And that is all I want and it does not seem too much to ask: for once and all to get the straight of it" (180). Will's desire is for an explanation, for a way to make sense of the world and himself, and that he does not care if this comes via the religious sphere (Christian), the ethical sphere (Christian/pagan/gentleman) or the aesthetic sphere (whoremonger)

demonstrates that he does not fit neatly into any of the spheres. He is set forth as something of an unwilling member of the aesthetic sphere; he is not really aware that he is in curiosity, but he knows he is deep in stasis and must get out. Will's problems are spiritual in that his stasis and curiosity would be solved by an immersion into the religious sphere, and his longing for signs are evidence of his spiritual problems, but he attempts initially to fix himself via ethical/scientific means: psychiatry. For five years now he has been seeing a psychiatrist every day, even though he seems to have received no solutions from his sessions and even though "The doctor didn't like his patient much, to tell the truth. They were not good friends. Although they had spent a thousand hours together in the most intimate converse, they were no more than acquaintance" (33). Part of this, doubtless, is that Will, having lost sight of his identity, is unable to tell Dr. Gamow the truth about himself and his condition; but an equally large part is that Dr. Gamow, the modern, scientific, ethical man, is unable to understand Will's difficulty with living, which is essentially spiritual. He recognizes but fails to understand Will's longing for signs, which, in The Last Gentleman, primarily takes the form of a telescope which he has bought for no logical (no, in other words, ethical) reason:

> "I could not help but notice you seem to have acquired what seems to be a very expensive possession . . . A telescope," mused the analyst, sighting into the farthest depths of his desk. "Do you intend to become a seer?"
>
> "A seer?"
>
> "A see-er. After all a seer is a see-er, one who can see. Could it be that you believe that there is some ultimate hidden truth and that you have the magical means for obtaining it?" (37)

Will probably does believe this, of course, although he is unaware of it. Consciously, he holds the contradictory belief that his problems can be cured by the ethical/logical/scientific, as is evidenced by his continuing to see his therapist. The telescope can therefore be assumed to function as another attempted entrance into the ethical sphere; in other words, he believes that by using the scientific instrument, he will be able to commit himself to science. The text says that "he prided himself on his scientific outlook and set great store by precision instruments" (29). However, his subconscious motives for buying the telescope appear to be more mystical than scientific; simply put, "he couldn't help attributing magical properties to the telescope . . . his very life would be changed if he owned the telescope" (29). Added to this religious fetishizing of the scientific instrument is, as Dr. Gamow notices, Will's tendency to buy expensive objects just before he enters one of his "fugue-states," the virtual blackouts in which he loses all sense of time and place and wakes up several weeks later somewhere he does not remember going. These fugue-states can be read as basically religious ecstasies, but it may be more accurate to say that they are the product of Will's—belonging nowhere, ever curious, he loses all concept of self and blacks out.

Besides the telescope, Will's other attempt at looking for signs and wonders comes in the female body, where religious longing and sexual desire are united in the novel. At the outset, he perches himself in Central Park and stares through his telescope—his lens into the spiritual world—and sights one Kitty Vaught, another displaced Southerner who eats lunch on a bench. Being desperate for signs,

> He fell in love, at first sight and at a distance of two thousand feet. It was not so much her good looks, her smooth brushed brow and firm round

> neck bowed so that two or three vertebrae surfaced in the soft flesh, as a certain bemused and dry-eyed expression in which he seemed to recognize—himself! She was a beautiful girl but she also slouched and was watchful and dry-eyed and musing like a thirteen-year-old boy. She was his better half. (8)

Leaving aside the obvious moral issues of this scenario—Will is surreptitiously watching (or stalking) Kitty, whom he has never met, through a telescope from two thousand feet away and believes himself to be inextricably in love with her—the problem should be clear: If Will does not know who he is, if his identity is constantly in flux, how can he recognize himself in Kitty Vaught? This passage seems to be an expression of Will's dissatisfied position in the aesthetic sphere. While the narrator claims that Will's attraction to Kitty is not primarily physical, this assertion is subverted by the somewhat lengthy blazon of her body. Will's magnified male gaze thus suggests the aesthetic sphere, particularly since it takes place from a great distance. At the same time, his attraction is not solely physical, and his romantic terminology suggests that he longs to make an ethical commitment to her, to paradoxically find himself in himself through commitment to an outside ideal, and this idea is the essence of the ethical sphere. Lastly, that he sees her through his telescope—coded later as a sort of quasi-religious symbol—suggests a desire for the religious sphere.

So Kitty is a would-be sign, and Will is more than happy to seize the opportunity. He follows Kitty around New York until he finally ends up with her family in a hospital room; it turns out that Kitty's father is an old friend of Will's, and Will quickly becomes a member of the Vaught family. He does this, befitting his personality (or lack thereof),

by changing himself for each of them: "The Vaughts liked the engineer very much, each feeling that he was his or her special sort of person. And he was" (64).

Each member of the family that Will meets in the hospital is either an aesthete (Rita, who believes in the vague, nonjudgmental and noncommittal adage that "anything two people do together is beautiful" [178]) or an ethicist (Mr. and Mrs. Vaught, icons of the New South and committed to capitalism and the "good life"). Kitty is an aesthete, a fact she is aware of on some level. At first, she plays along with Will's ethical intentions of marriage, frequently calling him "darling," but she does not seem particularly invested in the idea. However, it soon becomes evident that she is obsessed with herself, and this self-obsession necessarily blocks any attempt of Will's at moving into the ethical or religious spheres. She is a failed dancer, and nearly every time she talks with another person for an extended period of time, she brings up this topic and stays on it, even after it becomes clear that the other party is uninterested, as the following conversation between her and Will demonstrates:

"Would you take me to a dance?" asked Kitty, her head turned away.

"Sure. But what is curious is that—"

"I've been dancing five hours a day for years and I can't remember the last dance I went to."

"—he did not feel himself under the necessity, almost moral, of making love—"

"I love to dance."

"—in order that later things be easy and justified between him and Miss Trumball, that—"

"My grandmother composed the official ATO waltz at Mercer," said Kitty.

"—that even under the conditions of siege he did not feel himself under the necessity, or was it because it was under the conditions of siege that—"

"You're so smart," said Kitty, shivering and huddling against him. "Oh, I'm so cold." (112)

Will tries to talk to Kitty about something important to him—in this case, his grandfather's commitment to the ideal of a Southern Gentleman—and Kitty barely listens. Even when she responds to him with "You're so smart," it is clearly only to shut him up so she can again talk about herself. It is important that Will is talking about his ancestors' belief in Southern values—in other words, about the ethical sphere—here, as it designates his longing to attach himself to something; Kitty's lack of interest implies her own lack of interest in anything but the aesthetic. And her inability to hold an actual conversation with Will indicates that she exists in the Heideggerian being-against-one-another, whereas Will, for the moment anyway, would dearly love to enter the being-with-one-another.

Shortly after meeting the Vaught family, Will becomes essentially one of them and is offered a paycheck to spend time with the youngest child, Jamie, who is dying. It is during this stage of the novel that Will attempts to turn sexual intercourse into an avenue at least of stability, if not of grace.[14] That Will decides to go back home to Alabama with

[14] Throughout the New Testament, St. Paul contradicts the notion that a person could "force God's hand" in this way—a person cannot make something into an avenue of grace, as this is completely God's call. For example: "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God"

the Vaughts implies that he is attempting to reclaim his family history of genteelism and marry Kitty, both indications of the ethical sphere. Mr. Vaught asks Will to drive with Jamie in the family RV. That the automobile is named "Ulysses" is no surprise, given Odysseus' frequent liaisons with the Greek pantheon but preference for the ethical commitments he makes to Penelope; the RV, then, becomes one of the novel's frequent ambiguous triple symbols—it could be the vehicle for Will's religious quest; it could be his entry into the ethical sphere; or, of course, he could have commitment-free aesthetic-sphere sex with Kitty in the back of it. As the rest of the Vaughts prepare to head back to Alabama, Will approaches Kitty, who is planning instead on going to Europe with Rita, and declares his supposed love for her:

> "I need you."
>
> "You do?"
>
> "And that although I will be all right eventually, I still have a nervous condition, and that for some time to come I'll need you to call upon."
>
> "You will?"
>
> "I've loved you ever since I first saw you in Central—that is, in Jamie's room."
>
> "Ah."

(Ephesians 2:8, NAS). Any attempt on Will's part to force God to grant him grace is thus doomed to failure. Here, he attempts it subconsciously. In The Second Coming, he will attempt it consciously.

> Love, he thought, and all at once the word itself went opaque and curious, a little howling business behind the front teeth. Do I love her? I something her. He felt his nose.
>
> "Let's go home, either to your home or mine, and be married."
>
> (104)

Even as Will tries to use Kitty Vaught as a grounding in the ethical, he realizes that it will not work. "I something her," he thinks—not love, not even respect—just something. She, of course, is unwilling to make this voyage with him. "Are you out of your mind?" (104) she asks him, and it is not until he is walking away in utter defeat that she decides she wants to be with him.

They walk to Central Park, with her brandishing a pistol for protection from thugs (or perhaps from Will, who must creep her out as much as he attracts her at this point), and it is there in a small amphitheater that they have sex for the first time. In the midst of passion, she agrees to marry him and begins calling him things like "dearest" and "darling." Her rapid switchings of tone suggest that she is playing a sort of role here, putting on the mask of the wife-to-be in a play-acting typical of the aesthete's fear of boredom. Kitty's role-shifting, it must be noted, is of a different character than Will's. In a word, she changes masks on purpose, whereas he, directionless and adrift, cannot help doing so. Will is aware of his own stasis but unable to end it; Kitty, on the other hand, is in Sartrean "bad faith," unaware even that she is lost. In fact, she specifically says that she sleeps with Will in order "to prove something to myself . . . A little experiment by Kitty for the benefit of Kitty" (109), a clear expression of the aesthetic being-against-one-another. Even though he realizes somewhere inside of him that it is not working, Will

sleeps with her in order to commit himself to her, but Kitty sleeps with him for wholly selfish reasons. Their reactions to the act are opposites, as well:

> Yet when at last the hard-pressed but courteous and puissant engineer did see the way clear to sustaining the two of them, her in passing the her test, him lest he be demoralized by Perlmutter's heaven, too much heaven too soon, and fail them both—well, I do love her, he saw clearly, and therefore I shall—it was too late.
>
> "Dear God," said the girl to herself, even as he embraced her tenderly and strongly—and fell away from him.
>
> "What's the matter?"
>
> "I'm so sick," she whispered. (111)

Here, Kitty cannot connect when Will wants to; later, their roles will be reversed. As the family makes their way south, they stop for a night in South Carolina. Outside the motel, Will tells her he loves her, and she repeats it to him. "Why did this not sound right," he thinks, "here on Folly Beach in old Carolina in the moonlight?" (166). The location of this encounter is telling—it seems to be a sign to Will, warning him that the relationship is folly, that it will not allow him to commit the way he wants to and that in fact it will keep him from entering the higher sphere of the religious. He does not pay attention to this sign, however (which is ironic, given his absolute hunger for signs in the first half of the novel), and instead has sex with Kitty in the service room, which does not bring either salvation or commitment—"The next day they [go] their separate ways as before" (168). Will's attempts at stability and commitment fail, and alienation, being-against-one-another, and the aesthetic have won out again.

Will's return to the South with the Vaughts, like his relationship with Kitty, abjectly fails at providing him with any stability or any object or idea to commit himself to;[15] in fact, he feels more miserable in Alabama than he did in New York City. He returns to a South of "invincible happiness" (186), of a wholly different character than the one he left seven years earlier, one that he cannot connect with: "He had felt good in the North because everyone else felt so bad . . . his own happiness had come from being onto the unhappiness beneath their happiness. It was possible for him to be at home in the North because the North was homeless" (185-186). Will went South seeking the ethical sphere, but once he arrives there, the North appears to him to be ethical. He describes Northerners as "good steady wistful post-Protestant Yankees" (187). At the same time, he feels that in the South, he is on the outside of the ethical sphere looking in; the region is committed, if not to God, then at least to religion, and the "light-footed . . . hawk-eyed . . . God-fearing" (187) Southerners keep Will miserable in subconscious envy.

Even when the three of them—Will, Jamie and Kitty—enroll in college, he finds no satisfaction: "How strange it was that school had nothing whatever to do with life. The old talk of school as a preparation for life—what a bad joke. There was no relation at all. School made matters worse" (201). Kitty, on the other hand, aesthete that she is, loves the social aspects of college; when Jamie and Will decide to drop out and drive to New Mexico, they try to take her along with them, but she protests because she cannot bear to miss the football game between their unnamed university and Tennessee. The relationship between Will and Kitty essentially disintegrates during this scene. Will once

[15] Again, even hedonism—Will fails at remaining in (or at least enjoying) the aesthetic sphere as consistently as he fails at entering the ethical and religious.

again asks her to marry him, and she disgustedly walks away. Sex has failed as a method of stability, as a method of connection, and as entry into the ethical, not even to speak of its failure to move Will into the religious sphere.

The only wholly positive aspects of Will's journey southward are his encounters with Sutter and Val, the two eldest Vaught children. Val, a Catholic nun who works with impoverished African-American children, appears almost out of nowhere while Will is staring at a golf course and, equally out of nowhere, lays an enormous responsibility upon him:

> "It may well happen that it will be you and not one of us who will be with Jamie during the last days of his life and even at his death."
>
> "I suppose that is true," said the engineer, taking note of a warming tingle between his shoulder blades . . .
>
> "Mr. Barrett, I don't want Jamie to die an unprovided death." (209-210)

What Val asks of Will, a man who has not heretofore in the novel given a single thought to God nor more than a passing thought to religion, is that he tell her brother on his deathbed "About the economy of salvation" (210). Will is horrified. Even though he at least occasionally and subconsciously longs for the religious sphere, he does not orbit any object, any god, in that sphere; instead, he is free-floating, and so the thought of converting his dying friend is perhaps even more abhorrent to him than if he were a nominally Christian ethicist. "How do you expect me to tell him what I don't believe?" (211) he asks her, and instead of answering, she changes the subject. When he refuses her request, he does so by retelling a story about his father refusing to rehire an alcoholic

servant at the request of a priest—he does so by latching onto a symbol of the ethical sphere, in other words, instead of by dealing with the situation as the free-floater that he is. Her response is good-natured, however, which throws him off:

> It's like the story about the boy who got slapped by quite a few girls but who—well. But it's extraordinary how you can ask the most unlikely people—you can ask them straight out: say, look, I can see you're unhappy; why don't you stop stealing or abusing Negroes, go confess your sins and receive the body and bloody of Our Lord Jesus Christ—and how often they will just look startled and go ahead and do it. (213)

Will cannot deal with this response because it concerns exactly what he cannot do—he cannot commit to the religious sphere—and so Val walks away and leaves him "nodding in ancient Protestant fuddlement and irony" (213). However, for reasons completely unknown to himself but related to his subconscious longing for the religious sphere, he eventually does go to Santa Fe to find Jamie and have him baptized.

Val's older brother Sutter is the most complex character in the novel apart from Will, who meets him only a few pages after his first encounter with Val. Will immediately latches on to Sutter as a spiritual guide; Will tells Sutter he has "reason to believe you can help me . . . I can tell when somebody knows something I don't know" (218). And indeed, Sutter is a sort of prophet for a secular age. He is a pathologist, a fitting occupation for him, since he can diagnose every ill of society but does nothing to treat them. Sutter exists completely and utterly in the aesthetic sphere and is the only character in the novel who fully cops to doing so. He is a former scientist/ethicist who has turned his back on the middle sphere and instead embraced pornography and

alcoholism. Late in the novel, Will finds one of his notebooks, and the entries the text gives us explain a great deal about who Sutter is and why he behaves the way he does. From his position in the aesthetic sphere he attacks the ethical sphere so embraced by the Southerners around him:

> Americans are the most Christian of all people and also the lewdest. I am no match for them! Do you know why it is that the Russians, who are atheists, are sexually modest, whereas Americans, the most Christian of peoples, are also the lewdest? . . . Last night Lamar Thigpen called me un-American. That is a lie. I am more American than he is because I elect the lewdness which he practices covertly. I unite in myself the new American lewdness with the old American cheerfulness. (292-293)

Sutter—and, we are to assume, at least partially Percy, since so many of the comments in Sutter's notebook echo essays in The Message in the Bottle and Lost in the Cosmos—sees those who are ostensibly in the ethical sphere as essentially in Sartrean "bad faith," lying to themselves and living an aesthetic life as they profess the ethical sphere. Sutter is better than they (at least by his estimation) because he is honest about who he is. It is strongly implied in Sutter's notebook that he was once on the very cusp of entering the religious sphere; finding himself unable to do so, he knew he could not return to the respectability and social conformity of the ethical, and so instead he became an aesthete, a doctor just waiting for his pension to kick in, a pornographer. In his notebook, he tells his sister Val that "You opted for the Scandalous Thing, the Wrinkle in Time, the Jew-Christ-Church business, God's alleged intervention in history. You acted on it, left all and went away to sojourn among strangers. I can understand this even though I could never

accept the propositions" (307). Val herself, however, is not part of the religious sphere, at least not according to her brother:

> Do you realize what you did then? You reversed your dialectic and cancelled yourself. Instead of having the courage of your scandal-giving, you began to speak of the glories of science, the beauty of art, and the dear lovely world around us! Worst of all, you even embraced, Jesus this is what tore it, the Southern businessman as the new Adam, you say, smart as a Yankee but Christian withal and having the tragical sense, etc., etc., etc.—when the truth of it is, you were pleased because you talked the local Coca-Cola distributor into giving you a new gym. (308)

Val, according to Sutter, sold her soul to the ethical; she turned her back on genuine Christianity and instead embraced the ethical and modern version put forth by the people around her.

Later, Sutter further describes Val's beliefs to Will set off against the terms of the religious sphere.

> She did not mind at all if Christendom should be done for, stove in, kaput, screwed up once and all. She did not mind that the Christers were like everybody else, if not worse. She did not even mind that God shall be gone, absent, not present, A.W.O.L., and that no one noticed or cared, not even the believers. Because she wanted us to go the route and be like Sweden, which is not necessarily bad, but to go the route, to leave God out of it and be happy or miserable, as the case might be. She believes that

> then, if we go the route and run out of Christendom, that the air would be cleared and that even God might give us a sign. (377-378)

Ironically, Sutter's description of Val's belief is a clear expression of the destruction of the ethical—Kierkegaard's Christendom, as opposed to Christianity—in favor of the religious, God's sign.[16] Sutter, however, believes that Val has betrayed this belief and fully reintegrated with the ethical: "In short, she sold out. Hell, what she is is a Rotarian" (379). Believing Val to be in bad faith, Sutter positions himself as "the most religious person I know; because, like you [Val], I turned my back on the bastards and went into the desert, but unlike you I didn't come sucking around them later" (308). If Sutter could only believe in God, it is implied, he would be the novel's sole Christian character; even as an atheist, in fact, he is the most self-aware and awake character in the novel, since he recognizes and confronts the issues that circle around the spheres of existence. He is an aesthete through and through, but at least he understands his own aestheticism; he is out of step with society insofar as it involves the ethical, but, unable to embrace the religious sphere and having to embrace something, he has gone the opposite direction and become an aesthete. In this way, he is a sort of quasi-doppelganger of Will, who cannot embrace anything, be it aesthetic, ethical or religious and is unaware of his own inability.

Unsurprisingly, then, Sutter does to some extent and in a twisted way function in the novel as the spiritual guide that Will sees as him as on their first meeting, a role which Sutter tries his hardest to reject. But when Will reads his notebook, it has "the effect of loosening his synapses, like a bar turning slowly in his brain" (309). Sutter

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[16] Will himself will attempt an experiment in this vein in The Second Coming.

writes extensively in his notebook about sex. Left in a world without God and rejecting the ethical sphere, he can find salvation only in sex:

> Lewdness = sole concrete metaphysic of layman in age of science = sacrament of the dispossessed. Things, persons, relations emptied out, not by theory but by lay reading of theory. There remains only relation of skin to skin and hand under dress. Thus layman now believes that entire spectrum of relations between persons . . . is based on "real" substratum of genital sex. (279-280)

Percy would use this passage almost verbatim in his nonfiction work Lost in the Cosmos,[17] so we are apparently to assume that Sutter is his diagnosis, even if he is wrong about the cure. He embraces this loss of non-sexual human connection where Lost in the Cosmos critiques it: "The perfect pornographer = a man who lives in both anteroom of science (not in research laboratory) and who also lives in twilight of Christianity, e.g., a technician. The perfect pornographer = lapsed Christian Southerners" (280). This description is, of course, of Sutter himself, the pathologist who can diagnose the world's problems but is wholly uninterested in finding a cure.[18] Instead, he sets up what he knows to be problems as a new sacramental system: "I do not deny, Val, that a revival of your sacramental system is an alternative to lewdness . . . for lewdness is itself a kind of sacrament (devilish, if you like). The difference is that my sacrament is operational and

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[17] "Western man is promiscuous because something unprecedented has happened. As a consequence of the scientific and technological revolution, there has occurred a displacement of the real as a consequence of which genital sexuality has come be to seen as the substratum of all human relationships, of friendship, love, and the rest. This displacement has come to pass as a consequence of a lay misperception of the physicist's quest for establishing a molecular or energic basis for all interactions and of what is perceived as Freud's identification of genital sexuality as the ground of all human relationships" (Percy, Cosmos 43).

[18] Sutter's disinterest in cures indicates that he is not a scientist in the ethical sense—he is not committed to medicine. His practice of medicine is thus a sort of aesthetic curiosity; what, after all, is the point of diagnosis if one is not going to look for a cure?

yours is not" (281). The problem with Sutter, the "lapsed Christian Southerner," calling genital sexuality a sacrament, however, is that, if there is no God, there is no real grace to be found and thus no sacraments. In The Second Coming, Will Barrett will develop a religious system that allows for sex to be truly sacramental, i.e., to be an avenue of grace; here in The Last Gentleman, without a strong movement toward the religious sphere, sex can at best be only a distraction, a failed method of gaining stability, and more likely it becomes just another form of Heideggerian being-against-one-another, mere curiosity. Sutter's is ultimately a nihilistic viewpoint. We can trust Sutter, aware and sharp as he is, to provide a diagnosis, but the end result of his viewpoint is destructive.

What Sutter's nihilism does for Will, however, is to show that the ethical sphere is not ultimately viable in and of itself—since Sutter had been brought to the cusp of the religious sphere, he could not go back to the ethical but instead retreated to the hedonism and nihilism of the aesthetic. Will takes Sutter as his guide, and in doing so must be willing to reject the "good life," cultural Christianity and everything else associated with the ethical sphere. Indeed, after he reads the notebook, he goes into yet another fugue state, another crisis of identity: "Oh, what is this place?" he asks himself. "Where am I bound and what is my name?" (293). Will's bout of amnesia causes him to forget much that has happened to him in the past few months; he is again in stasis:

> He had forgotten Kitty and left her at the university and now remembered nothing more than that he had forgotten. There was only the nameless tug pulling him back. But he had also forgotten what Sutter told him the night before—*come find me*—and recorded only the huge tug forward in the

> opposite direction. He shrugged: well, I'm not going back because I've been there. (294)

Ironically enough, then, sex does function as a sort of avenue of grace for him; Sutter has destroyed the ethical sphere and in doing so reduced the modern world to two options, religious faith or sexual nihilism. Even Sutter's command to Will, "come find me," echoes Christ's words in Matthew 28:11: "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Sutter cannot give him this rest—in fact, he represents sexual nihilism, the being-against-one-another that is diametrically opposed to this rest—but it is implied that, if Will can remember the failure of the ethical sphere (represented in the text by his desire to settle down with Kitty) and if he can resist the pull back toward the aesthetic—if, that is, he can substantially critique Sutter's worldview—he will at last find something to believe in.

Significantly, Will, deep in his fugue state, seeks out Val:

> "How are you, Bill?"
>
> "Not too good," he said, watching to see how she saw him. From his breast pocket he took Sutter's casebook and made a note of her name.
>
> "Is that Sutter's?" she asked, but made no move to take it.
>
> "I suppose it is," he said warily, "do you want it?"
>
> "I've heard it all before, dear," she said dryly. "When he gets drunk he writes me letters. We always argued. Only I've stopped."
>
> *Tell me what is tugging at me*, he wanted to say. (296)

Val is unable to do so, however, because, as Sutter implies, she is no longer in the religious sphere but merely the ethical. She has stopped arguing with Sutter—she has

"heard it all before"—because she no longer believes in Christ but only in the structures of Christendom around her. The only thing Val can do is point in the direction of Sutter. "Sutter and Jamie were here," she tells Will. "They said I was to tell you they were headed for Santa Fe" (297). Sutter and Jamie have undertaken the religious quest that Will was to have performed with the dying boy, although it seems unlikely that Sutter will give him the last rites. Val also points Will away from Kitty—away, that is, from the sex that functions only as a distraction for him in this novel.

Will slowly makes his way across the country to Santa Fe, although it appears that he does so somewhat unwillingly. Early on in his journey, for example, he runs into Aiken, the "pseudo-Negro" he met in Levittown. Aiken and his friends need to leave town as fast as possible because one of them, an actor who is there with his mistress, is involved in a custody suit; however, another of them, Bugs Flieger, is in jail in Ithaca, so they cannot leave. Will hands Aiken the keys to Ulysses and tells him to go, that he will stay and talk to the police about getting Bugs out of jail. When Will gives Aiken the keys to the RV, he symbolically hands over the keys to what could have been his entry into the religious sphere to a man committed to social justice and change, a representative of the ethical sphere, and this suggests a hesitance about his religious quest.[19] Indeed, he is forced to spend several days at his uncle's house in Louisiana, where the sheer banality and shallowness of life nearly makes him lose sight of his mission—until, that is, he reads more in Sutter's notebook, at which point "The bar turned in his head, synapses gave way, and he slept ten hours dreamlessly and without spansules" (346). The next day,

[19] Social justice is an important component of the religious sphere, certainly, but the type of social justice advocated by Aiken and his friends is one divorced from God and grounded instead in the ethical system of social progressivism.

after retrieving the camper from Aiken, he calls Kitty. Once again, talking to her pulls him toward the ethical sphere:

> "I'm going on now to find, ah, Jamie."
>
> "I know. We're counting on you."
>
> "I wish you were here with me."
>
> "Me too."
>
> All of a sudden he did. Love pangs entered his heart and melted his loin and his life seemed simple. The thing to do—why couldn't he remember it?—was to marry Kitty and get a job and live an ordinary life, play golf like other people. (351)

Will wants to settle down and essentially commit to the idea of the Southern Gentleman to which his ancestors subscribed. This is not the thing for him to do, however, and it is a positive, not a negative, that he continues to forget Kitty and marriage—sex draws him from the religious into the ethical and distracts him from his real mission. At this stage in his life, sex and sexual desire are pretty much completely negative, interruptions from the religious life he could attain instead. Even though Kitty is self-centered and childish, it is not that she is bad in and of herself—it is only her position as an unwitting temptress to Will that makes her a dark character in The Last Gentleman.

Fortunately, however, Sutter's notebook, this time an entry written directly about Will, pulls him back. Sutter says that Will is too committed to science, that "His 'trouble,' he thinks, is a disorder of such a character that if only he can locate the right expert with the right psychology, the disorder can be set right and he can go about his business" (353). But, Sutter writes to Val,

> Let us say you were right: that man is a wayfarer . . . who therefore stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him (i.e., his salvation) and which he had better attend to. So you say to him: Look, Barrett, your trouble is due not to a disorder of your organism but to the human condition, that you do well to be afraid and you do well to forget everything which does not pertain to your salvation. That is to say, your amnesia is not a symptom . . . But he will receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology, throw it into his immanent meat-grinder, and wait to see if he feels better. (353-354)

Sutter goes on to say that the only solution for Will is the pornographic and aesthetic lifestyle that he himself, Sutter, lives. Will sees this as a false dichotomy—"Where he probably goes wrong, mused the engineer sleepily, is in the extremity of his alternatives: God and not-God, getting under women's dresses and blowing your brains out" (354)—and he is right. The religious sphere, offering as it does a telescoping of the three spheres, would allow Will to have God, a mutually loving relationship with a woman and a sense of stability and grounding. And it is here that Will identifies himself as religious for the first time in the novel: "My problem is how to live from one ordinary minute to the next on a Wednesday afternoon. Has not this been the case with all 'religious' people?" (355). For the first time, Will is moving toward a permanent grounding in one of the three spheres; he has the potential not to float aimlessly anymore, to discover his authentic self and to live as that self. He is aware of his problems now—he sees that he cannot live from one moment to another because he does not have a concrete self to live as—and,

more significantly, he sees those aspects of his personality that he had previously identified as problems but which are not.

The very next scene in the novel consists of Will's arrival in Santa Fe—the implication being that, since reading this entry of Sutter's notebook and coming to these conclusions about himself, he has not been distracted (by sex or anything else) from his mission. This is short-lived, however; he gets to the ranch where Jamie and Sutter are staying, does not find them, and he immediately begins discounting the very idea of signs, so instrumental to his push toward the religious: "I'm through with telescopes, he thought, and the vasty galaxies. What do I need with Andromeda? What I need is my Bama bride and my cozy camper" (358). Will seems unable to commit to the religious or any other sphere on his own; without a genuine spiritual guide, he will always be pulled back by sex. However, Sutter, not fully trustworthy to begin with, is unwilling to take Will any further on his journey. Will clearly needs a spiritual guide in order to enter the religious sphere, but the one character in the novel who sees the world more or less as it is is unwilling to be that for him; because of this, Will will always "backslide," so to speak. This problem is never solved in The Last Gentleman, and it is not until the events of The Second Coming, decades later, that he finds the spiritual guide he is looking for—and, significantly, his guide allows him to integrate sex and desire (always his biggest temptations) into a religious worldview.

In the meantime, he is left again drifting and aimless. When he finally finds Sutter, he insists that the doctor has something to tell him, some sign to give, and demands that he do so. Sutter steadfastly refuses:

> What do you take me for, some pissant wise man, ole rebel Sutter whom the yokels back home can't stand and who therefore by your peculiar logic must be onto something just because they're not? You know something, Barrett? There's one thing I've never been able to get the straight of, and that is what it is you want of me. I suspect it is one of two things. You either want me to tell you to fornicate or not to fornicate, but for the life of me I can't tell which it is. (381)

These two options (sex and ethics, essentially) represent the odd binary pair Sutter has formulated that Will has begun to see through. The irony is that when Will finally does enter the religious sphere all those years later, he does so by fornicating.

The Last Gentleman does, however, end with a spiritual awakening of sorts, only tenuously connected to Jamie's deathbed baptism. As they exit the hospital after having the last rites administered to the boy, Will asks Sutter where he is going, to which he replies, "I have a date" (407). This response is ambiguous—either Sutter is going off to make good on his promise to kill himself after Jamie died; or else he is off to engage in meaningless sex. Either way, Will is horrified and begs him not to leave, not to retreat to the nihilism and meaninglessness of the aesthetic sphere. Will plans on returning to Alabama, and he needs his spiritual guide:

> "Dr. Vaught, listen to me. I'm going to do what I told you I planned to do."
>
> "I know. You told me."
>
> "Dr. Vaught, I want you to come back with me."
>
> "Why? To make this contribution you speak of?"

> "Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett—" and he actually pointed to himself lest there be a mistake, "—need you and want you to come back. I need you more than Jamie needed you. Jamie had Val too." (409)

Will "needs" Sutter to act as a guide for him; he has not yet learned to stand on his own. Sutter tells him he will think about it, but as his car pulls away from the hospital, Will runs after him:

> The Edsel paused, sighed, and stopped.
>
> Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds.
>
> The Edsel waited for him. (409)

This ending is ambiguous. It could be that Will and Sutter are going back to Alabama to succumb to the influence of sex, marriage and the ethical sphere; or it could be that Will is going to continue the religious quest begun when they came to Santa Fe. The novel therefore ends on either a note of hope or in utter despair; it is not at all clear which. If Will marries Kitty, he will be settling for the lesser sphere of the ethical (or perhaps even the aesthetic, since, as it becomes clear in The Second Coming, Kitty herself never enters the ethical), and he will continue to be lost. If, on the other hand, he and Sutter somehow seek and find God (with or without the aid of sex), he may finally put an end to his twenty-odd years of searching.

The Second Coming: Sex as Salvation

"What if there were two,
Side by side in orbit around the fairer sun?"
- Michael Stipe, "Nightswimming"

"It's the strange thing about you mystics, how
often your little ecstasies wear a skirt."
- John Updike, Rabbit, Run

The Second Coming, Percy's 1980 sequel to The Last Gentleman, makes it absolutely clear what has happened at the end of the first novel. It opens with Will Barrett several decades older and firmly entrenched in the ethical sphere. He has found what he always claimed to be looking for—commitment to, if not love for, a wife (who dies shortly before the action of the novel) and a comfortable upper-class life in North Carolina. He is also deep in despair, in this case a suicidal depression caused, not alleviated, by his comfortable life and position in society. The longing for the religious (and the aesthetic, once again in the form of Kitty Vaught) is still present, this time in the form of Will's attempts at forcing God's hand through ethical/logical/scientific means. These ultimately prove failures, but Will is ultimately able to find a way in, through Kitty's daughter Allison, an escaped mental patient who functions as Will's opposite in that she is in the religious sphere without a connection to the ethical. The two essentially reject modern society together, and in doing so are both saved through each other. Sex, which in The Last Gentleman, was almost exclusively negative, has been turned on its head, and functions here as an avenue for the grace Will has sought his entire life.

At the outset of the novel, Will feels that his entire life has been a sort of sick joke: "Perhaps it is possible, especially in strange times such as these, for an entire people, or at least a majority, to deceive themselves into believing that things are going

well when in fact they are not, when things are in fact farcical" (5). Will, perhaps again subconsciously, recognizes that, having come so close to the religious sphere decades earlier, his retreat and entrenchment into the ethical is a sort of moral and existential failure. His body and psyche again begin to give him signs, this time the polar opposite of The Last Gentleman's fugue states. "The day after he had received the local Rotary's man-of-the year award for service to the community" (5)—a recognition of his no-doubt valuable work in the ethical sphere—Will begins remembering in great detail things that happened in his childhood.

This uncontrollable memory begins when he falls down on a golf course "for no discernable reason" (3). This fall is symbolic of his "falling out" with society and with the ethical sphere. Will has quasi-religious visions while lying on his back in the sand trap; for example, one Apocalyptic image features a cumulus cloud passing over him that "seemed to turn purple and gold at the bottom while the top went boiling up higher and higher like the cloud over Hiroshima" (3). In The Last Gentleman, Will attempted to look for signs in everything—the telescope and Kitty Vaught being only the two most prominent examples—but here the signs manifest themselves to him. Later, standing in the rough after slicing his ball, "He heard something and the sound reminded him of an event that had happened a long time ago. It was the most important event in his life, yet he had managed until that moment to forget it" (5). The event he remembers here, the event he continues to piece together throughout the span of the novel, is a hunting trip with his father in which his father attempts to shoot him in a murder-suicide. He had not remembered this second part until the present day, however, even after his father went through with his own suicide. Standing there in the rough that pleasant day in October,

Will begins to remember this event, and it is at this point that "it occurred to him that he might shoot himself" (4). Will's quasi-religious visions and uncontrollable memories have caused him to recognize the deep despair in which he has lived the last several decades. At the end of The Last Gentleman, presented with a religious quest, Will apparently turned his back on the highest sphere and instead committed himself to the ethical; now, at the top of society, at the pinnacle of the ethical, he falls into despair, and the religious begins to creep back into his life.

More signs present themselves to him. He stands on the golf course and is transported back to "a weedy stretch of railroad right-of-way in a small Mississippi town" (7), a location he has seen only once, "shortly after he had seen Ethel Rosenblum" (8). This Jewish teenager from Will's past functions in The Second Coming as a mixed symbol of sexual and religious signs. He and she competed for the top place in their high-school class; she was a math whiz whose skill at the subject is described in subtly sexual terms: "No matter how ungainly the equation, ugly and unbalanced, clotted with complexes, radicals, fractions, *zip zip* under Ethel Rosenblum's quick sure hand and they factored out and canceled and came down to unity, symmetry, beauty" (8). Will apparently watches Ethel's equation-working from a distance and associates it with teenage sex in the backseat of cars, the zip of her hand mirroring the zip of her skirt coming off. But he would only watch her from a distance; "They knew each other, had sat in the same class for four years. Not twenty words had passed between them" (8), even though he had "wanted her so bad he fell down" (8). There is a connection to Buechner and Lion Country here. Like Antonio, Will is deep in existential stasis, and this is demonstrated through his inability to act sexually. Perhaps this event long ago was his

first move toward the religious sphere; perhaps if he had made some sort of move, had taken some sort of leap of faith, he would have entered. As it is, forty years later, he can only think,

> Ethel, why is the world so designed that our very smartness and closeness keep us apart? Is it an unspoken pact? Is it an accursed shyness? Ethel, let's you and me homestead in this leftover land here and now, this non-place, this surveyor's interstice. Here's [an empty lot] the place for us, the only place not Jew or Gentile, not black or white, not public or private. (9)

Clearly, Will is searching for an actual human connection, the being-with-one-another, a connection which he has not had in his years of respectability.

In addition, Will interprets his vision of Ethel Rosenblum as a sign pointing him in the direction of the religious sphere. He tries in vain to explain this to Vance, his doctor friend:

> "You know, my wife, who was very religious, believed that the Jews were a sign."
>
> "A sign of what?"
>
> "A sign of God's plan working out."
>
> "Is that so?" Vance's eyes strayed to his wristwatch. He pretended to brush off a fly.
>
> "But what about the absence of Jews? The departure of Jews?" he asked, looking intently at the doctor until his eyes rose. "What is that a sign of?"
>
> "I couldn't say." (13)

Nevermind for now the fact that "The Jews were and are not leaving North Carolina" (13), Will is seeing religious signs and indications, even though it is unclear what they are pointing to. His doctor is unable to recognize or to speak intelligently about these signs because he is himself so firmly entrenched in the ethical (and doubtless unaware of his own despair).[20] Will feels, although he will not be able to put it into these words until much later in the novel, that God has abandoned or is abandoning the world, that He is remaining silent and refusing to speak to anyone. The signs in and of themselves are not really that important—the signs he finds (for example, the supposed mass exodus of Jews from North Carolina) are largely meaningless—what is important is that he is looking for signs in the first place, looking, in a word, for the religious sphere.

All of this occurs in what the narrator describes as a highly religious area—which is to say the ethical sphere—of the world, an area firmly placed in Kierkegaardian Christendom: "He lived in the most Christian nation in the world . . . in the most Christian part of that nation . . . in the most Christian state in the South . . . in the most Christian town in North Carolina" (14-15). His wife, as he mentions to Vance, was "highly religious." His daughter Leslie has recently become "born again" (in other words, an Evangelical Protestant), a movement that Percy portrays as ethical rather than religious despite its adherents' attempts in the novel to abolish the structures around traditional Christianity. And yet this Christendom offers no hope whatsoever for Will because it is just another version of the ethical sphere that has led to his Heideggerian/Kierkegaardian despair. Shortly after making his observation about the

[20] Every character in the novel resides in the ethical, except for Will and Allison (who eventually reside in the religious) and Kitty (who resides in the aesthetic)—this is evidenced by their assumptions that Will and Allison, in displaying religious longing, are mentally ill.

religious nature of the South, he pulls over to the side of the road, removes a German Luger from the glove box of his expensive Mercedes, and fires it five times into the gorge. "Firing the Luger, he discovered, helped knock him out of his 'spells.' But it did not work as well as before" (15). Instead, he again contemplates suicide:

> He held the muzzle against his temple. Yes, that is possible, he thought smiling, that is one way to cure the great suck of self, but then I wouldn't find out, would I? Find out what? Find out why things have come to such a pass and a man so sucked down into himself that it takes a gunshot to knock him out of the suck. (15-16)

Suicide, then, seems a sort of religious impulse—Will wishes to find his life by losing it, to paraphrase Mark 8:35—but it is ultimately an unviable option. Will must wait to see if God speaks before he kills himself; he must see that there is a convincing reason to move into this religious sphere. This word from God will eventually take the form of a sexual encounter, but in the meantime, Will's life is consumed by waiting for a word; the everyday and in many cases not everyday events that happen to him float by as if in a dream, subjugated to the desire for God to prove Himself once and for all. This desire toward the religious is balanced by its intensely ethical nature—Will wishes to believe in God, but not until He proves Himself in a rational and logical way, the way of ethical/scientific society. He cannot hear from God this way, since the religious sphere involves a teleological suspension of the ethical.

Will is deep in existential despair; he feels absolutely unwhole, below that of even his pet cat, who is after all "exactly one hundred percent cat, no more no less" (18). Furthermore, he believes that every person everywhere is similarly unwhole:

> as for people nowadays—they were never a hundred percent themselves. They occupied a place uneasily and more or less successfully. More likely they were forty-seven percent themselves or rarely . . . three hundred percent. All too often these days they were two percent themselves, specters who hardly occupied a place at all. (18)

Will's position is in some ways similar to Sutter Vaught's in The Last Gentleman: He has become a sort of spiritual pathologist and has diagnosed the problem with "people nowadays." The difference between him and Sutter, however, is that instead of retreating into the blind hedonism of the aesthetic, Will wishes to find a cure; he wants to know "how to restore the ninety-eight percent" (18). His answer comes quickly. As he is stepping out of his car in his garage, he is narrowly missed by a stray bullet from a poacher. As he dives for the garage floor clutching his own gun, he realizes that "The missing ninety-eight percent is magically restored! How? By the rifle shot!" (19). The poacher's rifle shot succeeds where Will's Luger fails because it thrusts him into a crisis; he did not see it coming. As he discovered early on in The Last Gentleman and as Percy describes in detail in The Message in the Bottle, it is often easier to feel at home in a very unpleasant environment in which one is forced into a crisis, whereas it is often difficult to feel at home in a very pleasant one. The ethical sphere, with its comfort, its grounding and its all-around pleasantness, ultimately leads Will not to happiness but to despair. Somehow being violently discomforted gives him hope.

Will's position in the desperate ethical sphere is explicitly connected with his father's attempt to murder him in a perverse echo of Abraham and Isaac. Answers are not really given as to why the elder Barrett would try to kill his son; it is likely connected to

his own suicidal drive. Perhaps, seeing no hope in the world, he wanted to spare his son the agony of living. His father's suicide, however, left Will in a constant state of rebellion:

> Ever since your death, all I wanted from you was out, out from you and from the Mississippi twilight, and from the shotguns thundering in musty attics, and racketing through funk-smelling Georgia swamps, out from the ancient hatred of allegiances, allegiances unto death and war and rumors of war and under it all death and your secret love of death, yes that was your secret. (83)

His father is portrayed in The Last Gentleman as a fading Southern gentleman, a man at least somewhat committed to the ideals of the Old South, which would place the elder Barrett in the ethical sphere. Interestingly, then, Will's rebellion against his father consists of him entering the ethical sphere to an even greater degree: "I went away, as far as I could get away from you, knowing only that if I could turn 180 degrees away from you and your death-dealing there would be something different out there, different than death, maybe even a kind of life. And there was" (83). Will's solution, then, is largely wrongheaded. The despair his Southern-gentleman father experienced in the ethical sphere pushes him in rebellion into the same sphere. He marries "a rich hardheaded plain decent crippled pious upstate Utica, New York, woman" (83)—for whom, it is implied later in the novel, Will never had that much love or affection—and to make an enormous amount of money. What's more, Will "even tried to believe in the Christian God because you didn't, and if you didn't maybe that was what was wrong with you so why not do the exact opposite?" (84). Will's efforts only entrench him further in the ethical sphere that

caused his father's suicide, however, and now he finds himself standing at the edge of gorges holding pistols to his head. What would actually have taken him as far away from his father as he could get would be to have entered into the religious sphere or found something to which to attach himself when he was there in New York City in the 1960s and to actually believe in God as a person rather than as an abstract ethical concept. But Will did not do this; he married rich, got richer, earned the respect and esteem of almost everyone he knows, and "Now Marion is dead and I can't believe I spent all those years in New York in Trusts and Estates and taking dogs down elevators and out to the park to take a crap" (84). Will's life up to this point in his 50s or 60s has been dog excrement. The ethical sphere temporarily put an end to the despair of the aesthetic stage, but now, decades later, it has produced its own sort of despair. Will has earned nothing but existential stasis and an awareness of his own alienation. Other than the conception of his daughter, the sexual did not seem to be a major part of his life while Marion was alive, since he was not attracted to her. Thus, the ethical sphere for Will appears to be largely celibate, and it is significant that his quasi-religious visions of Ethel Rosenblum have a sexual component to them. As in Buechner's Lion Country, sex is tied to the religious sphere in The Second Coming, whereas in The Last Gentleman it was at best distraction and maybe even actual damnation.

Will's chapters in The Second Coming alternate with chapters describing the life of Allison Huger, a young woman who escapes from a mental institution. Allison's situation eerily echoes the young Will Barrett's—her life, as Percy describes Will's in the first novel, is a "gap." Unlike Will, however, Allison is to a large extent forced into this condition by the shock treatment she has undergone for the past three years. Even the

shock therapy and the mental institution echo Will's earlier experiences; we can assume from this parallelism that Allison, too, stands on the cusp of the religious sphere, and this position manifests itself—as it did for Will in The Last Gentleman—in what society calls mental illness. Science, the absolute embodiment of the ethical sphere, is unable to "cure" her because there is nothing to be cured. All science—represented here by her mental-hospital psychiatrist, Dr. Duk—can do is declare her mentally ill and resort to desperate measures like shock treatment. That this treatment is psychologically and spiritually harmful to Allison—she describes it as making her feel like a "done-in rape victim" (34)—seems not to be a concern at all; she is treated more like a prisoner than a patient. The ethical sphere ultimately causes her nothing but harm, and it is not until she flees the hospital that she begins to feel whole. "I can already feel myself coming down to myself," she thinks,

> From giant red star to Betelgeuse, Dr. Duk's favorite, trying to expand and fan out and take in and please the whole universe (that was me!), a great gaseous fake of a star, collapsing down to white dwarf Sirius, my favorite, diamond bright and diamond hard, indestructible by comets, meteors, people. (107)

The cosmic language Allison uses here echoes Will's telescope in The Last Gentleman, which functioned as a symbol of religious longing. Meanwhile, modern psychology and the ethical sphere it represents can only harm Allison; it diagnoses her and forces her to become something she is not. Out on her own, she begins to find who she really is, and she enters the edges of the religious sphere, a realm of utter subjectivity that exists outside of normal society.

Allison escapes from the mental institution shortly before the action of the novel, but her mind, addled by her "treatment," is a complete blank. She can remember almost nothing. Foreseeing this problem, she wrote herself a long letter before her last round of electroshock. This letter functions in much the same way for Allison as Sutter's notebook did for Will in The Last Gentleman—it becomes a sort of spiritual guide for her. Allison's loss of memory forces her to live in the moment, to exist in a state of trust of the universe—this, along with the memory loss itself, suggests that she is on the cusp of the religious sphere. Allison's letter to herself instructs her to live in an abandoned greenhouse on some property her aunt left her in her will. Taking up in the greenhouse, a move away from society, is roughly congruent to Will, Jamie and Sutter's long trip West near the end of The Last Gentleman; it is a sort of religious quest, although Allison feels considerably less ambiguity about her quest than Will did about his. Allison's flight from the mental institution comes shortly after her discovery and acknowledgement of her existential freedom:

> What was my (your, our) discovery? That I could *act*. I was *free* to act. Is this something everyone knows or thinks he knows or, if he knows, knows in the wrong way? With gold-tinted corneas everything looks like gold, but it's fools gold.
>
> Here was the kind of gold-tinted corneas I had: Dr. Duk told me many times I should be free to act for myself . . . Which, of course, is not doing so at all. I was following instructions. Then how does one ever make the discovery that one can actually be free to act for oneself? I don't know. I don't know how many people, if any, do it. (46)

Having found this new existential freedom, Allison exists, as did Will in the first novel, in the realm of pure possibility. If this is as dizzying for her as it was for him, she gives no indication of it. Unlike Will, "pure possibility" for Allison allows her to approach the religious sphere—she is in the process of finding an actual grounding for herself based on who she really is. She seems much more comfortable with the religious sphere than Will did.

It is at the greenhouse on the abandoned property that Will and Allison first meet. He has sliced another golf ball—he has diagnosed his newfound slice as part of his dissatisfaction with the ethical sphere, incidentally—and it breaks a window in her greenhouse. He, still part of the social/ethical, which puts monetary value on everything, attempts to pay her five dollars for the expense of the window, but she, closer to the religious, pays no attention and focuses instead on the psychical effects of the smashed window: "I was lying in my house in the sun reading that book. Then *plink, tinkle*, the glass breaks and this little ball rolls up and touches me. I felt concealed and revealed" (88). Will is struck by her manner of speaking—"She sounded like a wolf child who had learned to speak from old Victrola records" (88)—and believes Allison to be a freeloading hippie squatting on someone else's land. The truth of the matter is that her electroshock has caused her to be very concerned with the actual meaning of words. Words are like moments to her—she lives inside each one. She asks him, "Are you still climbing on your anger?" (89), and these words, for whatever reason, cut to the very core of him: "suddenly it was not she but he who was odd in this silent forest, he with his little iron club and nifty fingerless glove" (90). Will, like Allison, is "concealed and revealed"—perhaps in the being-against-one-another but moving into the being-with-one-

another, and he seems to recognize her as being in the situation he himself was in so many years earlier. She reminds him of those "fond hazed eyes from Alabama twenty years ago" (90).

This memory is ambiguous, as "those fond hazed eyes" could either refer to himself, hazed as he was, floating aimlessly in the aesthetic sphere, or to Allison's mother, Kitty Huger (née Vaught). The title of the novel is multifaceted, and one possible interpretation of it is that Allison is literally the "second coming" of Kitty Vaught (albeit with wildly different results). Another is that it refers to Will's rebirth and entry into the religious sphere by the novel's end. A third is the bawdy sexual insinuation of the word *coming*. I will suggest that the novel's title and the novel itself can be understood only as a combination of these three interpretations: Will is reborn and brought into the religious by means of an ejaculation into the body of the second coming of the woman who once kept him from the religious. That woman, Kitty, reappears in Will's life about halfway through The Second Coming, and she has changed very little in the intervening decades, nor has her role in Will's life. She is married to an aggravating golf partner of Will's, but she is not in the ethical sphere; if anything, she is more of a hedonist/aesthete than she was in The Last Gentleman. Once again, as it did decades earlier, the promise of sex with Kitty distracts Will from what he actually needs. The main difference this time around is that she is aggressively sexual toward him:

> She came shouldering up to him. She was bolder, lustier, better-looking but almost brawny, a lady golfer, brown and freckle-shouldered. Her voice was deeper, a musical whiskey-mellowed country-club voice with a laugh he didn't remember. When she sat, she sat straddled good-naturedly,

> opening her knees. When she leaned toward him, her heavy gold jewelry clinked. (152)

Kitty's new aggressiveness makes her threatening in a way she was not in The Last Gentleman; there she seemed like a child caught up in a love affair, and if she pulled Will in the wrong direction, she was at least unaware of it. Will was the aggressive one in the first novel; he wanted Kitty to be a receptive blank slate on whom he could write anything. Here, on the other hand, she is far more than receptive; she knows exactly what she is doing when she propositions Will, but she is perfectly willing to cheat on her husband. There is also a strong implication that she comes on to Will for personal financial gain. Kitty and her husband, Walter, want to gain control of the land that their daughter, unbeknownst to them, owns and is living on, and Will is a lawyer. He suspects that Kitty wants to use sex as a way to get what she wants from him: "What did they want? Money? Free legal advice? Both? It seemed to be Kitty who wanted it most. At least she came closest, touched, hugged, kissed, poked, jostled, swayed against, jangled, shimmered. What did she want?" (162). Will's suspicions that she merely uses him do not keep him from lusting after her, however: The novel is peppered with his thoughts about "Kitty's ass," and he agrees to a tryst with her. As in The Last Gentleman, this tryst and Will's lustful thoughts are a distraction for him from his ultimate ending point, which is bound up in Allison Huger and the religious sphere.

It is worth noting at this point that thus far in both Percy books, sex has functioned almost entirely as a negative. Kitty and her ass pull Will away from religious faith; Sutter gives up on religious and turns to pornography instead; Rita, a thoroughly unlikable character, takes the hedonist view that anything is holy as long as both parties

are game. Desire, then, is for a book and a half synonymous with lust—it is at best a distraction and probably actually sinful. This is a far cry from Buechner's Lion Country, in which desire/lust signified a longing for religious faith and an end to stasis. But Percy's view is not this simplistic—sex itself is not bad, even outside the confines of marriage. What is important for Percy (and for Buechner, too) is that sexual desire be fixated upon a proper object. Rita's desire in The Last Gentleman is very nearly free-floating; it is lust in general, not even lust in particular, and with no object, it cannot possibly be focused on the proper object. Sutter's obsession with pornography and Will's telescopic gazing are forms of desire that give strength to the aesthetic sphere and the being-against-one-another. Even when Will meets Kitty and pursues marriage with her, it is clear that she is not the proper object for his desire. It is not until he meets Allison that sexual desire and sex itself are finally seen as positives rather than negatives.

A few days after Will meets Allison, he returns to the greenhouse, this time carrying a grocery bag full of avocados and olive oil. He and Allison seem able to diagnose each other. He recognizes that she, disconnected from the material world, is physically and socially malnourished. (He also gives her instructions as to how to transport a wood-burning stove into her greenhouse.) Allison, meanwhile, picks up exceedingly quickly on Will's spiritual problems:

"What is entailed with you?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"You seem somewhat pale and in travail. Is the abomination at home or in the hemispheres?"

"I don't know. Maybe both. You mean my brain. I don't feel very well, to tell you the truth." (127)

Despite Allison's mental problems because of her electroshock "treatments," she and Will seem to understand each other on a spiritual level. To use a cliché, they "complete" each other—he is the ethical without the religious, bound pointlessly and despairingly to the structures and the values of the world; whereas she is the religious without the ethical, existing in a world of pure possibility but without any sort of grounding. Add to this the fact that Allison's memory loss puts her in a very similar position to the one Will occupied decades earlier, and it is not surprising that the two form a sort of odd connection, a connection that is reinforced when Allison asks, "Are you my—?" and trails off. Her mind completes the sentence for her. "For a moment she wondered if she had considered saying something crazy like 'Are you my lover?' Or 'Are you my father?' " (126). This is prescient of her, as Will will indeed be her lover by the end of the novel, and as there is some confusion as to whether his affair with Kitty in the 1960s might indeed make him her father.[21] The former puts them on equal footing; the latter (however improbable) sets him up as a sort of spiritual guide for her, or at least her voice in a world where she is not really capable of having one. He rejects this, however—"I wasn't trying to be your father or your doctor" (130)—which implies that their relationship must be one of equals. He cannot be her spiritual guide unless she is also his.

As previously mentioned, Allison, since leaving the mental hospital, has lost her interest in being what other people try to make her and instead is becoming her authentic

[21] If this is the case—and the answer is never given in the text—Will's sex with her, which brings him into the religious sphere, which stabilizes her, and which allows them both to live in the being-with-one-another, would be incestuous and thus perverse. This compares to the way that Bebb's abhorrent public sexuality in Lion Country somehow functioned as an end to stasis for others.

self, a function of the religious sphere's emphasis on radical subjectivity. Since becoming "sick," since becoming dissatisfied with the ethical sphere and since meeting Allison, Will begins to do the same: "All his life he had waited on people, tuned in to them, attended them. Now for some reason it didn't matter" (142). Immediately after making this observation, Will begins thinking about "the hall of the hospital where Jamie died in Santa Fe" (142)—a reference to the religious quest that he undertook decades earlier and another clue that he is once again approaching the religious sphere, through his dissatisfaction with his comfortable life in the ethical and perhaps with Allison Huger's help. He begins, as Allison does, as she must because of her treatments, to live in the moment:

> How did it happen that now for the first time in his life he could see everything so clearly? Something had given him leave to live in the present. Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but had forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he been present for his life. So his life had passed like a dream.
>
> (144)

It is important to note, however, that Will has not yet entered the religious sphere. He is merely approaching it, becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the ethical structures around him. The people who inhabit those structures begin to lose their humanity in his eyes; he begins to see them as unwhole, as the living dead flocking over London Bridge. For example, when he looks at Jack Curl, an Episcopalian minister who works with his life's nursing home, he sees "in an instant that he was not quite there. Looking at him was

like trying to focus on a blurred photograph" (146). He begins to see Christians and atheists as two sides of the same ethical coin: "People either believe everything or they believe nothing. People like the Christians or Californians believe anything, everything. People like you [Will's father] and Lewis Peckham and the professors and scientists believe nothing. Is there another way?" (153). This "other way," if he can find it, will be his entry into the religious sphere; it will free him from the ghosts of his past and make him whole, make him wholly himself and wholly able to live in the moment.

In the meantime, as he is only just beginning to move toward the religious and despite the newfound clarity of his vision, Will is still talks to the ghost of his father and sits in his Mercedes holding his Luger. Also, he is still highly susceptible to the pleasures of the aesthic sphere, embodied, of course, in Kitty Huger. His response to her come-ons—his desire to have sex with her—is set off against both the ethical and religious spheres. Will has not wanted a woman in years because of the "dream of golf and good works" (165) in which he has lived; the ethical sphere has kept him celibate. On the other hand, the only other woman he has thought about is Ethel Rosenblum, the sign which draws him toward the religious. Kitty is neither of these; she instead represents the aesthetic. Rekindling his relationship with Kitty will drag him as far away from the religious sphere as he can get, and, it can be assumed, it will plunge him further into despair. At times, Will seems to recognize this; at others, he does not. When he is in danger of being crushed by the banality of his friend Lewis Peckham, for example, he feels a strong pull toward Kitty:

> "Tell you what, Will. They don't need the father of the bride around here. Let's me and you cut out, go down to my spread, crack a bottle, and put on the Ninth Symphony."
>
> "No thanks, Lewis." Dear Jesus. Sitting with Lewis in his farmhouse, listening to the Ninth Symphony.
>
> "Name one thing better than the Ninth Symphony."
>
> Kitty's ass. "I'm not in the mood." He looked at his watch. What did Kitty have in mind? (177)

Kitty, however, is often accompanied in the novel by the image of Will holding or searching for a gun—even during this conversation with Lewis, he is holding the shotgun with which his father committed suicide.[22] Will, almost wholly convinced of the inauthenticity and unviability of the ethical sphere, is left with two options: Try to break through the maze of modern life in which "belief in shitty and unbelief is shitty" (175), somehow enter the religious sphere and find new life; or succumb to Kitty's passions, be pulled back into the aesthetic sphere and probably commit suicide out of sheer despair. These two options, it must be noted, resemble the two options Sutter presented him with in The Last Gentleman—to fornicate or not to fornicate, except that here Will will find that both the religious and the aesthetic involve sex.

Will's attitude toward God throughout the novel is one of frustration and anger over the deity's absence or aloofness. Will presents himself as having done his very best

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[22] Guns in general function throughout The Second Coming as emblems of the despair of the ethical sphere; Will's Southern gentleman father kills himself with a shotgun, and as the ethical sphere's appeal to Will wears out, he finds himself holding guns almost constantly. By the same stroke, however, their phallic shape and their association with the worn-out ethical might demonstrate a pull toward the religious sphere, since this pull is accompanied in The Second Coming by Will's sexual desire for Allison, a desire he does not seem to be aware of until he makes a literal "leap of faith" later in the novel.

throughout the past several decades to believe in God; one of the reasons, in fact, that he married Marion is that she was such a good Episcopalian. Will—perhaps because the very nature of his wanting to believe was that it was tied up in his wanting to fit into ethical high society—is unable to believe. For a time, he believed "like Pascal's cold-blooded bettor" (181),[23] but after a period he lost interest and faith even in that. The Christians around him are "assholes" (219)—"either half-assed, nominal, lukewarm, hypocritical, sinful, or, if fervent, generally offensive and fanatical" (219). His daughter Leslie falls into this latter group. She is part of the burgeoning born-again movement; she believes "in giving her life to the Lord through a personal encounter with Him," and so she has "no use for church, priests, or ritual" (183). Although Will says that she and her fiancée perform good works and seem "to be happy" (183), there is little evidence for this in the actual text. Leslie is described as "a tall sallow handsome dissatisfied nearsighted girl whose good looks were spoiled by a frown which had made a heavy inverted U in her brow as long as he could remember" (148), and almost every time she appears in the action of the novel, she argues with someone. Leslie, as best as one can tell, neither performs good works nor is particularly happy; her "personal relationship" with God has offered nothing in the way of love, joy, peace or the other "fruits of the Spirit" listed in Galatians 5:22-23. She becomes but another representation of ethical Christendom as set off against religious Christianity—yet another "asshole" Christian existing only in the ethical sphere. Her personal relationship is not with God—this would, after all, be getting at the heart of the Kierkegaardian religious sphere—but with the system of Christian she

[23] Percy here refers to the famous "Pascal's Wager": "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is" (81).

and her friends have created. There is a certain hypocrisy here on Will's part—it is easy for him to critique his daughter's religion, but he has no better option as of yet, but the important thing is that he recognizes the problems with cultural Christianity.

The problem for Will is that modern American society has created a false dichotomy—one must either accept Christendom (or another equally shallow set of rituals that have nothing to do with the original belief of the religion they are meant to be a part of) or reject belief wholesale and embrace atheism. This is not a viable option, however, for if believers are assholes, unbelievers are even worse:

> The present-day unbeliever is crazy as well as being an asshole—which is why I say he is a bigger asshole than the Christian because a crazy asshole is worse than a sane asshole.
>
> The present-day unbeliever is crazy because he finds himself born into a world of endless wonders, having no notion how he got here, a world in which he eats, sleeps, shits, fucks, works, grows old, gets sick, and dies, and is quite content to have it so. Not once in his entire life does it cross his mind to say to himself that his situation is preposterous, that an explanation is due him and to demand such an explanation and to refuse to play out another act of the farce until an explanation is forthcoming. (220)

Will has once again set up a false binary pair, and he is left hanging in a liminal space between the asshole believers and the crazy asshole unbelievers—both of whom, it may be noted, belong either to the aesthetic or the ethical. What Will seeks is a third way, an entry into the religious, a place where he can find sanity and grace, something John MacQuarrie says can come only from God:

> If grace is to be found anywhere, it must come from beyond the world of things and the society of human beings, though it may indeed come through these. We are directed toward a transcendent source of grace. This is neither a senseless nor a speculative idea, but rather a question of life and death that arises directly out of the structure of our own existence. (7)

Grace, according to MacQuarrie, is the only thing that can solve man's existential crisis; for Will Barrett, grace will come through the avenues of Allison Huger and sex. They are not the sources of this grace, but it comes through them.

With this in mind, Will devises a plan. He will force God's hand, force Him to act, and he will die if God refuses to do so. This is evidence of Will's Sartrean bad faith. God does not exist in the ethical sphere, and in Kierkegaard's theology, He is uninterested in proving himself in rational ways. To approach God, one must undertake the teleological suspension of the ethical. Will's plan, noble as it might be, is wrongheaded—in existentialist theology, it will lead only to frustration. The plan is complicated, perhaps unnecessarily so: He sends a letter to his old spiritual guide, Sutter Vaught, who is currently wasting the remainder of his life in the Southwest watching reruns of M*A*S*H and waiting for his pension to kick in. Will has apparently given up on Sutter's ever being a spiritual guide to him; he plans to enter the religious sphere alone, without any guidance from anyone. "It was your constant complaint," he writes to Sutter, "that I was forever looking to you for 'all the answers.' However much you find yourself inconvenienced by this request, it should at least please you to know that I have at last understood you. One must arrive at one's own answers" (217). It is not that spiritual guides do not exist to the religious sphere—as previously indicated, Will and

Allison are going to be each other's spiritual guides—it is that one person cannot force another person to enter it. Will will help Allison enter into the ethical sphere, and in turn, she will help him to enter into the religious. Will's failure to enter the religious sphere in The Last Gentleman was due in large part to his insistence that Sutter force him into it; such a forcing goes against the very nature of the religious. Will still does not completely understand this, however, as indicated by his attempts to force God to force him into the religious sphere. His plan is to enter an old Confederate cave on Lewis Peckham's property and to wait until he sees or hears a palpable sign from God, something that will break God's long silence in his life. If he hears nothing, he will starve to death in the cave, and Sutter will use another letter Will sends him to prove that his death was not a suicide—Sutter will then be the beneficiary of Will's enormous life-insurance policy. Will approaches his quest as though it might as well be suicide—because if God does not exist, if a third way does not exist, if he is stuck with the two options of being an asshole Christian or a crazy asshole atheist, he sees nothing worth living for.

Significantly, Will enters Lost Cove Cave at a time when he is supposed to be meeting Kitty for a tryst in his summer house. He is briefly disappointed: "It was enough to bring him up short, but after shaking his head and smiling at it—perceiving, let us admit it, a mild pang of regret in the groin—he was on his way again" (241). It appears that Will has finally broken the hold sex with Kitty has over his spiritual development; he is choosing his religious quest over the aesthetic pleasures of the flesh. On the other hand, his next thought is that, once entering the religious, he will be able to have sex with her again: "Who knows, he thought smiling, in one week, two weeks, I may be sitting with Kitty in the summerhouse enjoying the fall sunshine. Kitty's ass will keep for two weeks

or for eternity" (241). It will not, of course—if Will were to enter the religious sphere, he would no longer even be interested in making love with Kitty and hanging out in the aesthetic sphere she represents—but at least his thoughts really privilege the religious over the aesthetic and the ethical for perhaps the first time in his life.

Once inside the cave, Will plans to periodically numb himself with sleeping pills. His motives for doing so are clear but ambiguous. He says that "to sit here for a month and starve without a drug is too much of a bore to consider" (245). This reference to boredom is troubling, as boredom is the great fear, the great evil of the aesthetic sphere. I would suggest that, in attempting to abandon the ethical sphere, Will still feels a draw toward the aesthetic, even on his religious quest; this is why he thinks of Kitty's ass while descending into the cave, and this is why he brings the Placidyl capsules with him.

At the same time, he does not abandon the ethical sphere in any real way. "Unfortunately," says the narrator, "things can go wrong with an experiment most carefully designed by a sane scientist" (246). Will, despite his dissatisfaction with the ethical, with the structures of pleasure and comfort and knowledge and religious packed all around him, is still a scientist, still perhaps the engineer he was in The Last Gentleman. Science is the ultimate expression of the Percyian ethical sphere, and it takes a teleological suspension of the ethical to enter the religious sphere and to hear from God. Where does that leave Will Barrett in Lost Cove cave? "A clear yes or no answer may not be forthcoming, after all. The answer may be a muddy maybe" (246). Despite Will's attempts to find the "third way" between asshole believer and crazy asshole unbeliever, he has set up a new binary pair: Either God must speak to him in a way that leaves no room for doubt, or else God does not exist.

On the other hand, his first action once he settles himself in his spot is at least nominally religious. He prays:

> Speak, God, or be silent. And if you're silent, I'll understand that . . .
>
> O ye suicides who go not so gently into that good nothing, you can't tell me either. But I've beat you . . . In either case I'll know . . .
>
> If the Last Days are at hand, one shall know what to do. I shall go to Megiddo with Sutter and wait for the Stranger from the East.
>
> If you do not speak and the Jews are not a sign, then that too is an answer of sorts. It means that what is at hand are not the Last Days but only the last days, my last days, a minor event, to be sure, but an event of importance to me. (245-246)

This, it must be noticed, is not the prayer of Abraham in Fear and Trembling; it is something more akin to the prayer of the knight of infinite resignation. The act of forcing God's hand is itself not an act of faith, although it does represent a longing for the religious sphere. For Kierkegaard, faith is a blind trust, a leap into the unknown. Here, Will attempts to make the unknown known so he can accept it. His plan, however, is shattered by a toothache.

Will comes off of the Placidyl with a searing pain in his mouth; one of his teeth is beginning to rot. It hurts so bad that he vomits. It is implied—but never stated in a way that leaves no room for doubt, since the Christian existentialist God always leaves room for doubt—that this toothache and its ensuing nausea (Sartre's term for disgust at existence itself and perhaps a signifier for the dizziness of freedom) is God's answer to

Will: "In the end not only did he not get a clear answer to his peculiar question, not a yes or a no or even a maybe—he could not even ask the question . . . Whether it was God's doing or ordinary mortal frailty, one cannot be sure" (247). He begins to hallucinate—a common side effect of Placidyl—talking again to his father, seeing images of Charles Lindbergh, living amongst the Confederate soldiers who once inhabited the cave, and so forth. Finally he wakes up for good, with little idea of how long he has been out. Vomiting and in intense pain, he forgets all about his religious quest and attempts to exit the cave. This is an abject failure. As he climbs down the chimney that will take him to the bottom of the cave, he slips, falls, lands on the hard rock below. His flashlight is broken, and so he is left in complete darkness. "Ah, then, this is how things are," he thinks. "Things might be settled for me after all. If he hadn't been so weak, he would have laughed. What kind of answer is this to an elegant scientific question?" (258). For Christian existentialists, however, this seems to be the only answer God is willing to give to elegant scientific questions, to the questions posed by the ethical sphere: God—like the God of Percy's fellow southern Catholic Flannery O'Connor—leaves him bleeding and broken in darkness at the bottom of a cave. He drags himself through the cave toward the light coming through an opening until he falls through:

> But this was a fall not through air, not vines or bushes, through air and color, brilliant greens and violent and vermilion and a blue unlike any sky, a free-fall headfirst with time enough to wonder if he might be dead after all, what with this tacky heaven and the great black beast of the apocalypse roaring down at him, eyes red, jaws open and ravening. (262)

Despite Jay Tolson's assertion that Percy disbelieves in the Kierkegaardian teleological suspension of the ethical, The Second Coming here presents as clear and powerful a picture of the leap of faith as any in literature. It is coded as religious because of the imagery Will falls through, and the actual suspension of the ethical is demonstrated by his having had everything—his position in life, his questions, even his own body—taken away from him, and this is the only place he has left to go.

He lands, of course, in Allison's greenhouse, and he awakes to find her nursing him back to health. The importance of this cannot be overstated: Will Barrett has demanded from God concrete and irrefutable proof of His existence, and God has dropped him into Allison's lap, providing him with that proof. Will suspends the ethical/scientific, but like Abraham and Isaac, God does not require its ultimate sacrifice. Allison takes care of Will; he is a "problem to be solved" (267), and she moves him, bathes him, feeds him. These actions have a religious significance for Allison; Will reminds her "of some paintings of the body of Christ taken down from the crucifix, the white flesh gone blue with death" (270). They also have sexual significance. Just before Will makes his leap of faith into her house, she is thinking about sex: "She 'did it' at Nassau with Sarge, the Balfour jewelry salesman, thinking that it might be the secret of life. But even though she and Sarge did everything in the picture book Sarge had, it did not seem to be the secret of life. Had she missed something?" (274). Heretofore, sex has been for Allison, as for Will, an essentially negative thing, and this is likely because she has been unable to connect with other human beings: "What do I do if people are the problem? Can I live happily in a world without people? What if four o'clock comes and I need a person? What do you do if you can't stand people yet need a person?" (274). This

combination of religious imagery, sexual imagery and images of human connection suggests that Will will not be her savior but rather someone with whom she seeks a savior. It also suggests that sex will be a method of grace for both of them, which makes Allison very different from her mother, Kitty, who manages only to distract Will from such quests. What is more, Allison seems to have been able to make human connection only through the religious sphere: "Perhaps she had not sunk deep enough into her Sirius self. If one sinks deep enough there is surely company waiting. Otherwise, if one does not have a home and has not sunk into self, and seeks company, the company is lonesome" (277). Paradoxically, Allison can only make human connections through the radical subjectivity of the religious sphere—now that Will, too, is in this sphere, they will be able to exist together in the being-with-one-another.

When Will wakes up, he sends Allison to town to send a telegram to Sutter Vaught calling off the plan. Performing this favor for Will helps Allison feel more stable in society: "Victory! She had made it in the world! Not only could she make herself understood. People even understood what she said when she didn't" (283). Will and Allison are already beginning to stabilize each other. But this is not a relationship of dependence; Allison may have fallen in love with Will, but she does not feel that she needs him:

> She could make it now, with him or without him. But think of life with him there beside her in the Mercedes! Or in her greenhouse. He would remember for her if she forgot. She would hoist him him if he fell. Now she knew what she did not want: not being with him. I do not want him not being here. (289-290)

She even decides that she would like to marry him, but it is important to note that this desire is wholly different from Will's desire to marry Kitty in The Last Gentleman, despite its surface similarities. Allison does not know Will, much as Will did not know Kitty, but they now operate in the same sphere, and this is very important. Having, as they do, opposite ailments—Allison cannot remember, and Will cannot forget; Will falls down constantly, and Allison is borderline-obsessed with hoisting—they complete each other.

They make love when Allison returns from her trip into town, and during or perhaps after, Will gives her important information:

> "Because your mother and I are old friends, among other reasons, she has asked me if I will be your legal guardian . . . Your mother does not know that you are here and she doesn't know that I know you."
>
> "Legal guardian. What is there to guard?" . . .
>
> "Your real estate. This property and the island you inherited. They are quite valuable. Your parents believe it is in your interest to be declared legally incompetent and for me to be appointed your guardian since the court will not appoint them."
>
> "What do you believe?"
>
> "In my opinion you are not incompetent in the legal sense or the medical sense. I think you are quite capable of taking care of your own affairs." (298-299)

Kitty wants Will to become Allison's guardian only in the legal sense of the word—she does not wish him to actually guard her but instead wants him to take her property from

her and give it to her parents. Will, on the other hand, becomes Allison's guardian in a real sense—he protects her from their machinations and restores to her what is hers. In other words, he helps her to be more whole, more herself, and in doing so, allows her to live in both the telescoping religious sphere and the ethical sphere, committed, paradoxically, both to each other and to the radical subjectivity in which God lives. This is reinforced when he tells her, "You're Sutter turned happy" (302)—she is Sutter because she recognizes the inadequacy of the ethical sphere by itself, but instead of turning to nihilism and hedonism, she makes the leap of faith into the religious and gets the ethical sphere in the deal. This is possible because the spheres are telescoping—each higher sphere contains the lower ones. This, as mentioned in the introduction, is why it is only a teleological suspension, rather than an abandoning, of the ethical—as Abraham received Isaac even though he was willing to sacrifice him, Allison receives Will and the ethical once she turns her back on modern society.

Will is overjoyed as he drives home, so much so that he jumps out of the car in the rain:

> *Ha*, he said, dancing, snapping his fingers and laughing and hooting, *ha hoo hee*, jumping up and down and socking himself . . . *I know, I know the name of the enemy.*
>
> The name of the enemy is death, he said, grinning and shoving his hands in his pockets. Not the death of dying but the living death. (311)

This pronouncement against the ethical sphere is not at all like the pronouncements earlier in the novel; before, recognizing the inadequacy of the ethical sphere made him depressed. Now, having entered the religious sphere, he is overjoyed. He has hope, a cure

for the "living death" of the ethical, of science, of wealth. He is no longer a Sutter-esque pathologist unable to cure the sicknesses of modern man and of himself; "You gave in to death, old mole, but I will not have it so. It is a matter of knowing and choosing. To know the many names of death is also to know there is life. I choose life" (314). Falling into Allison's house and, perhaps more significantly, having sex with her, is God's answer to Will's questions; sex has brought him salvation. But because the leap of faith is a suspension rather than an abandonment of the ethical, he has the ethical sphere restored to him with new grandeur; he is committed to Allison now, too. This is not the old ethical sphere of golf courses and used-car lots and science, however—it has been redeemed.

When he gets home, however, he feels a tug back to his old life. Like Sutter's notebook in The Last Gentleman, Will needs Allison around in order to believe; away from her, temptation is occasionally too strong to resist. His daughter Leslie has left a letter, meanwhile, asking him to meet her at Jack Curl's; despite his last week spent "shacked up in the woods with a little forest sprite" (331), she would like his help in donating money to the communes she has planned. While he thinks that it does not matter what he does with his money, he also feels "a faint prickle of interest" (332) and drives to see her. This is not to be, however; on the way there, in an echo of God's sign of the toothache, he gets into a serious automobile accident and finds himself walking down the highway, unaware even of what state he is in. He feels that "Leslie has a plan. He felt himself in good hands" (335). Without Allison, he is drifting back toward the ethical, even if his lack of concern about money and about the car he has just wrecked suggest the religious. He finds himself deciding to buy a farm in Georgia near where his father tried to shoot him; in other words, he finds himself no longer living in the moment but

resorting to the past and to the future. He is losing his grasp on the religious, and subconsciously he seems to recognize this: "But I've forgotten something. What? He felt like a man who has lost his wallet. He slapped his pocket. It was there with the five hundred dollars" (338). It is the religious, it is Allison that he is forgetting, and this is further reinforced when he actually boards a bus to Georgia.

Fortunately, he remembers just in time. As he listens to his seatmate prattle on about how much he enjoys his job as a loan shark,

> his eye traveled along the ridge and came to a notch wherein the darkness of the pine and spruce there grew a single gold poplar which caught the sun like a yellow-haired girl coming out of a dark forest. Once again his heart was flooded with sweetness but a sweetness of a different sort, a sharp sweet urgency, a need to act, to run and catch. He was losing something. (339)

This tree reminds him of Allison and of the religious sphere he is abandoning to live in the past, to live in the ethical comfort of his money. He finds himself at the front of the bus, ordering the driver to pull over. The bus driver fights with him, then opens the door and slams on his brakes. Will smashes into the door jam, falls out, catches his foot on the door and hits the ground hard—this second fall is perhaps another leap of faith, another teleological suspension of the ethical.

Like all such suspensions, however, this one goes against every norm and more of society, and Will wakes up in a mental institution, committed by a society that cannot in any way understand his religious impulses. The doctors at the hospital, of course, attempt

to diagnose Will's spiritual condition (not even ailment at this point) as a physical disease:

> It's called Hausmann's Syndrome. It is in fact a petit-mal temporal-lobe epilepsy which is characterized by typical symptoms. It is not too well-controlled by Dilantin but there's a new drug which works very well. That is to say, it clears up the symptoms. (345)

Will's "symptoms," however, are not symptoms at all, but signifiers of his entrance into the religious sphere, and any attempt to control them via drugs will only be a forceful attempt at dragging him out of the sphere. Even the scientists "don't know a damn thing about Hausmann's Syndrome except how to treat it" (358), and yet they are sure it is a disease and that their "treatment" is correct. Will's blood, alternately acidic and alkaloid, must be tested every hour, and he must be fed, alternately, vinegar and Alka-Seltzer. Unsurprisingly, removed from Allison, he consents to this treatment: "He felt exactly as he felt when he was drafted in the army, a dazed content and a mild curiosity. His life was out of his hands" (348). He has surrendered his radical subjectivity to the "expert" opinions of the ethical/scientific doctors. Indeed, he feels better under the treatment: "How odd to be rescued, salvaged, converted by the hydrogen ion! . . . Had he fallen down in a bunker, pounded the sand with his fist in a rage of longing for Ethel Rosenblum because his pH was 7.6?" (350). Since Will's "illness" has been given a scientific explanation, it will now take yet another teleological suspension of the ethical to reenter the religious sphere—Will must repudiate science, society and even common sense.

Will spends most of his time in the hospital talking to the Episcopalian minister, Jack Curl, and the other patients and watching reruns of Kojak on television, until Kitty bursts into his room in a fit of rage:

> Now I know why you didn't come to Dun Romin' or the summerhouse or anywhere at all, you . . . You—you dirty old man! . . . Because you were shacked up in the woods with Allison, you . . . snake in the grass! Taking advantage of a psychotic girl . . . Well, I'm here to tell you one damn thing, old pal. I hope to God you're pleased with yourself. She is now hopelessly regressed. She won't say a word. (360)

Having lost the intersubjectivity offered her by Will, Allison is forced to retreat back into alienation, not interacting with the world at all. Even when Kitty tells Will that Dr. Duk is going essentially to abduct Allison that afternoon, he is not moved. Instead, he wants to watch King Solomon's Mines on television. He has reentered the ethical sphere completely, thanks to the fixed environments and chemical "cures" of the nursing home. He believes in the ethical sphere again: "I've learned at last that I am one of them. But I'm improving them, am I not? I've found a better way than swallowing gun barrels; in short, I can shuffle off among friends and in comfort and Episcopal decorum and with good Christian folk to look after every need" (371). All hope seems to be lost.

All of a sudden, though, he snaps out of it. He leaves the hospital and goes to find Allison. There is little indication of what triggers this, except, perhaps, that with the commotion of his fight with Kitty and the excitement of watching King Solomon's Mines, he forgets to take his medicine. Freed from the medical constraints of the ethical sphere, life in the nursing home no longer makes sense to him. When he walks out the

door, when he forsakes his medicine, the Episcopate and the nursing home, he makes another teleological suspension of the ethical. Allison, despite her mother's claims of her "regression," speaks immediately and coherently to Will; she enters quickly back into intersubjectivity. They are almost immediately healed and restored upon seeing each other again. With Dr. Duk coming to abduct Allison, they must leave the greenhouse quickly, and they take a room at the Holiday Inn, where they eat and make love for hours. Will throws his guns away for good, signifying his healing from the scars of his youth. Allison, too, is healed: "It is now evident," she says, "that whatever was wrong with me is largely cured" (389). The two have been healed through each other, have entered the religious sphere to stay, and it has been done through sex. The ending of The Second Coming is the polar opposite of The Last Gentleman in nearly every conceivable way. It is not open-ended; we know where their lives are going. Will has at last completed the religious quest he began with Sutter, driving out of New Mexico. He is not failed this time, not resorted to the comfort and despair of the ethical sphere. He and Allison have grounded themselves in the religious, in intersubjectivity, in a certain kind of faith. Will is able to believe in—even love—God, and the novel ends with an explicit statement of that belief and love: "Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have" (411). Will and Allison end the novel in the religious sphere, having suspended the ethical sphere and then having had it returned to them in new raiment, grounded at long last, two planets orbiting each other while both orbit the sun.

What we have seen in Percy (and, in a less-sophisticated way, in Buechner) is an elaborate elucidation of the concept of grace, that mystical power of freedom that, according to Christian theology, can come only from God but comes nevertheless through avenues here on earth. These novels elucidate and expand Kierkegaard's notion of the spheres of existence and the Christian existentialist view that, despite the protests of Sartre and Heidegger, true human connection is possible and necessary. Sex, if we are to believe our novelists, is an important part of this connection. Will Barrett and Antonio Parr are from the outset stuck deep in stasis, in curiosity, in nothingness, and we are invited to watch as they are brought out of it. In both cases, it is through extramarital sex that the Gods of Percy and Buechner choose to operate—an action traditionally condemned by the Christianity of the ethical sphere. The view of God presented in these novels is thus in line with the God of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling—He is not bound to social convention, to reason or logic or ethics, but operates in ways chosen and sanctioned only by Him.

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